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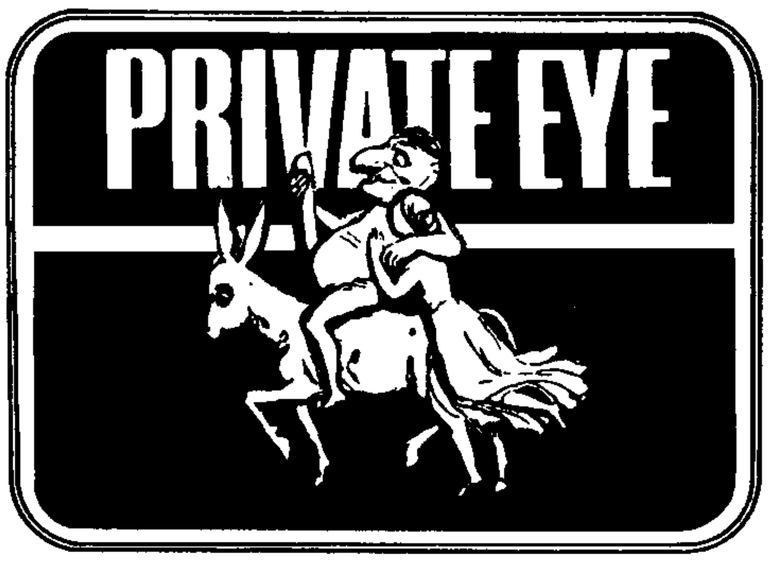

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IN THE TEAROOM

WHILE the pundits were busy analysing what the departure of David Blunkett means for Tony Blair, the more pressing question in the tearoom was: "What does it mean for Gordon?"

The significance of Charles Clarke's promotion to home secretary is that for the first time a plausible "stop-Gordon" candidate occupies one of the great offices of state. The chancellor regarded the unpopular Alan Milburn more as an irritant than a rival. Now things are different.

For some time now both Blairites and Brownies have been speculating about one possible post-election scenario: one where, after Blair wins the election, Gordon is offered the foreign secretaryship. The conventional wisdom – encouraged by the Brownies – is that he'd refuse it, march off in high dudgeon to the back benches and begin an insurrection against Blair.

But the chancellor's recent behaviour suggests this may be way off the mark. To the disappointment of his supporters, Brown did not use his pre-budget report to project an alternative leadership vision. He was far too clever for that. What he did was to engineer an economic boomlet. Realising that he had lost control over new policy and writing the manifesto, he had to find another way of claiming the credit for a forthcoming election triumph. "It was the economy wot won it" will, he calculates, be a lot more credible that "it was Milburn and the pointy-heads wot won it".

Meanwhile, the chancellor has developed a consuming interest in all things international. He's full of his plans for Britain's chairmanship of the G8 and his own "Marshall plan for Africa". He's got views about the future of the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. He's lining himself up to become Gordon Brown, the cosmopolitan international statesman. If they offer him the foreign office, he'll grab it. All of which would leave Charles Clarke looking boringly provincial.

'Quintus Slide'

ALMOST every profile of David Blunkett that has been written since he joined the government has paid tribute to his legendary memory and ability to recall exactly what material is placed in his ministerial red boxes – an image that the MP himself has been keen to cultivate.

"Probably my failing is that I feel I need to be on top of things too much," he told the *Guardian* in May 2000. "I've never wanted anybody to say I don't know the facts, or I'm not on top of the portfolio because I can't see."

He returned to the point in the *Mirror* two years later: "I'm spending more time than is good for me, going through background material. I do it in detail in order that I am never caught out" – and so fundamental did his biographer Stephen Pollard think the ability was that he opened his book with a tribute to it.

"Blunkett is helped by an amazing memory... That memory is aided by sheer hard work. He is methodical and conscientious, and would often surprise colleagues by quoting in detail from documents. This was partly the result of the huge amount of information that he would process and partly his astounding memory. His capacity for absorbing material is regarded with awe by colleagues."

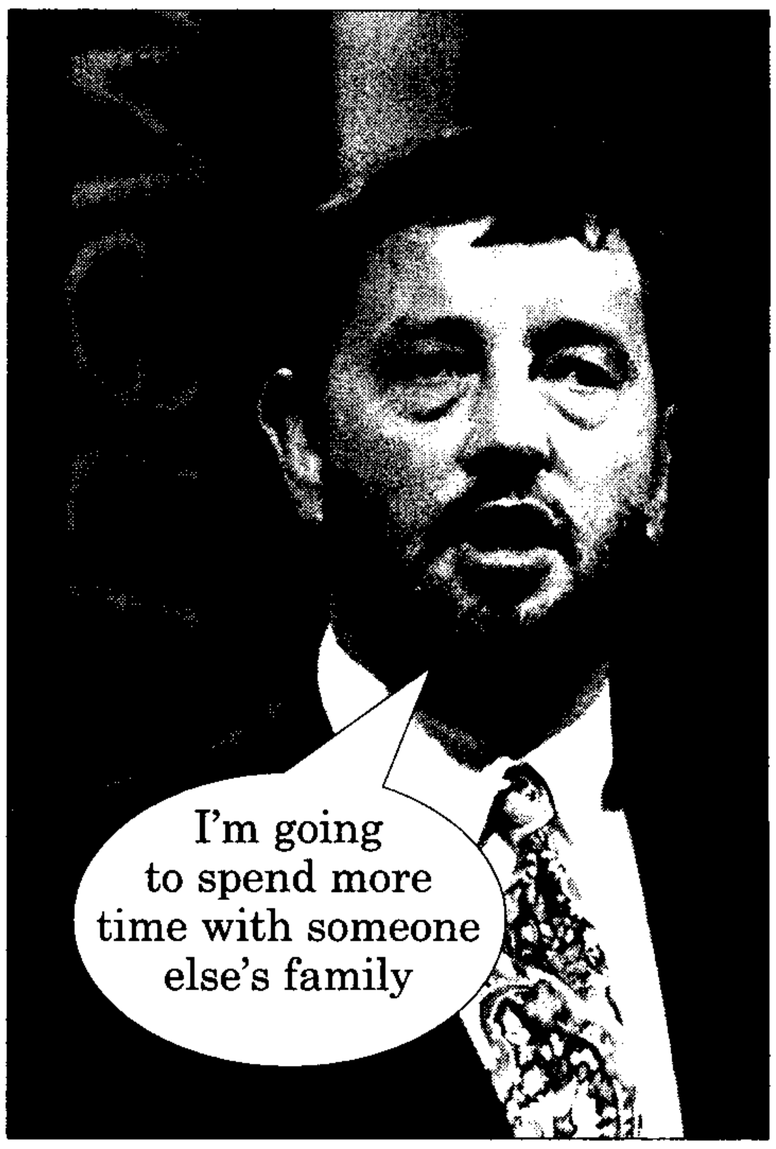
Now, however, most of that awe is reserved for Mr Blunkett's claim that he "did not remember holding a copy" of the letter from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate concerning Leoncia Casalme's visa application which mysteriously found its way into Mr Blunkett's red box, "no recollection of issuing instructions to deal with the application" to his staff who immediately dealt with the application, and "no recollection of dealing in any way" with the subsequent exchange of correspondence between his private office and the IND which resulted in the application being fast-tracked.

THE *Daily Mail*'s serialisation of Stephen Pollard's biography of David Blunkett cherry-picked much of the hastily-appended final chapters on the Fortier affair, as well as his intemperate remarks about cabinet colleagues.

The paper did not, however, find space for the home secretary's stated opinion of another great figure in public life. In March 2003 Blunkett proposed a toast to *Mail* editor Paul Dacre, whom he apparently "counts as a friend", at a party. Pollard reveals that Blunkett eulogised him as "a man who loves to hate, but actually reflects the best of journalism... the *Daily Mail* provides the best of journalism... Paul cannot resist poking the stick even if he agrees with you... I owe you one, even if its just a left hook."

Dacre has since printed a series of exclusive documents revealing the "mysterious speeding up" of not one but two visa applications by Kimberly Quinn's nanny, paid her to "reluctantly tell her side of the story", dismissed the Budd inquiry as a whitewash, printed large pictures of "the other woman who had an affair with him", splashed Blunkett's "withering assessment" of his cabinet colleagues on the front page and allowed columnist Simon Heffer to call him "obsessive and unhinged". With friends like these...

BLUNKETT RESIGNS



NEWS

FOLLOWING Allan Leighton's reappointment as Royal Mail chairman, speculation is rife that privatisation isn't far away. The serial director's success in turning a profit for the company while service standards are desperately poor make a sell-off look increasingly enticing for the government.

The rumour is hotly denied by the department of trade and industry and the company alike. Both stick to the line that Royal Mail is a "commercial organisation that provides a public service", an approach they maintain carries no promise of a sell-off.

But what do those at the top of the organisation really think? Chief executive of the Post Office David Mills, for example, was less guarded when he appeared before the Commons trade and industry committee recently to answer questions on the closure of a number of Crown post offices (those not run through franchises).

Firmly rejecting the idea that these branches should receive financial support, Mr Mills explained: "We have, if you like, the last bastion of nationalisation on our hands here. We are seeing the last throes of a terminal whale on the beach", before hastily adding that "It would be nice for this national jewel to be kept as it is, as a national jewel".

This was hardly a ringing endorsement of publicly-owned post offices from the man in charge of them, but Mills' views should not come as a surprise. Like Leighton, he was another captain of industry drafted in by trade secretary Patricia Hewitt. Before joining the post office Mills had enjoyed a 40-year career at Midland and HSBC banks.

THE United States has been doing so much shooting in the war on terror that the ministry of defence (MoD) had to sell the US defence department 130 million bullets in the summer.

The Americans' use of bullets has exceeded production from its single factory. And while Britain sends troops to support the US operation in Iraq for free, the MoD told *Private Eye* that the bullet "stock was sold as its book value. The stock was not newly manufactured and the sale price reflected this".

IT'S good to see that hopeless computer firm EDS provides the same level of service to itself as it does for its government clients.

For several days during December graduates trying to glean information on the company's UK recruitment programme were met with a plain white screen bearing the message: "Unfortunately we are currently experiencing some technical difficulties with our website and are unable to accept on-line applications. We hope to have this service available by 17 December 2004."

Yes: the people we rely on to provide essential government services like the benefits system's IT can't even keep a simple website up and running. A teenager in their bedroom could do better.

Street Of Shame

SO farewell then Lawrie "Insin" Sear, managing editor of the *Daily Mail*. After ten years as Paul Dacre's hatchet-man, the former nightclub manager has retired to a villa in Tuscany. And, after years of recoiling from the greasy jobsworth, *Mail* hacks are now eagerly seeking his company in the hope he may at last be free to tell them the truth about how bad things are.

For there are distinct signs of executive jitters. Dacre has already instructed Sear's successor to lop £1m from the budget – the first such cut in the *Mail*'s modern history. Also for the first time, expenses are now being scrutinised and slashed. Hacks can no longer choose their own hotels when away on a story; and the *Mail*'s travel company has been instructed never to speak to hacks, let alone heed their pleas for five-star treatment. Even Dacre's old cronies, such as the vile Geoff "Lavish McTavish" Levy, are having to tighten their belts.

No wonder a mini-exodus has begun, with star interviewer Angela Levin the latest to quit. Whatever happened at the *Mail* in the past – insults, intimidation, even physical violence – it did at least offer handsome pay and perks to hacks who delivered the goods. "Not so much golden handcuffs as golden electrodes on the nadgers," as one old hand recalls. But if the electrodes are no longer golden, will anyone want to stay?

GUESTS at a Christmas thrash thrown by Lord and Lady Rothermere at Claridges were delighted to be ushered into a ball room decked out as if it were onboard a ship.

Adding to the atmosphere was an *Evening Standard* billboard carrying the headline "White Star Line to New York". Sadly, the knives are now out for the bright spark who thought up this particular stunt given current sales at the *Standard* – and that the White Star Line's most famous vessel was the Titanic, whose maiden voyage to New York was not er... entirely successful.

"WHEN the tough talk is over, let's listen to sense on crime," pleads Mary Ann Sieghart, as she urges all policymakers to study the "refreshingly rational report" issued earlier this month by Rethinking Crime and Punishment (RCP)".

Despite devoting a whole column to singing the praises of this organisation, Sieghart has no space to mention that the five trustees in charge of RCP include a certain William Sieghart – her brother.

WHY does former *Torygraph* editor Sir Max "Hitler" Hastings now write so many of his political comment pieces for the *Guardian*?

"Well," he explained recently to an admirer who posed the question, "it's the only way to address the ruling classes these days."

"Release the suspicious bearded detainee"

The Home Secretary took his lover and her two-year-old son William to the upmarket resort of St Stephano at the end of May.

Weeks later, Mr Quinn was proudly telling friends that his wife was expecting their second child and that it was a 'miracle' baby, conceived without the help of infertility treatment. Now he has had to concede the baby is almost certainly Mr Blunkett.

Daily Mail

BLUNKETT COVERAGE

DAVID BLUNKETT's resignation was a very personal tragedy – at least for those hacks who had desperately cobbled together acres of coverage after he thoughtlessly announced it only a couple of hours before their papers went to press.

Most of them decided that rather than focusing on the actual reason he had lost his job – that Sir Alan Budd's inquiry had caught him lying about an abuse of his power as home secretary – it would be easier to simply accept Blunkett's own Sylvie Krin version of events.

Thus the *Mirror*'s front page declared it "The Price of Love" (arslikhan it augmented the following day by declaring Blunkett "Superdad"); the *Sun* had "Destroyed by the Woman He Loved"; while the *Mail*, which had led the repeated assault on Blunkett's political credibility during the previous fortnight, plumped for the heart-wrenching "The Man Who Loved Too Much" (surely the phrase they were looking for was "Lied Too Much"?)

Columnists forced to do a hasty rewrite of the obituaries they had on file concentrated on Blunkett's struggle against disability, twisting their metaphors beyond all recognition in their haste. "David Blunkett's blindness means that he would not have seen Michael Howard toss a copy of his damaging new biography across the dispatch box yesterday," wrote Tom Baldwin and David Chater in the *Times*. "But his disability also strengthens other senses and in the past 24 hours, he would have been acutely aware of the smell of death around his career."

In the *Sun* Jane Moore was also sniffing around in areas she shouldn't, perhaps mistaking Mr Blunkett for his guide dog – "What a comfort the scent of the flirtatious Kimberly Quinn must have seemed".

While the "smoking gun" which finished Blunkett's career – a series of emails and faxes between the home secretary's office and the Immigration and Nationality Directorate which resulted in Luisa Casalme's visa application being fast-tracked – was all but ignored, several papers were quite happy to claim credit for the home secretary's downfall themselves. "Right: Mirror story on December 2" yelped the *Daily Mirror* about its claim that Tony Blair had demanded that Blunkett choose between his paternity battle and his job, a claim which was actually, er, wrong; while the *Daily Mail* proudly pointed out that "the home secretary's departure came hours after yesterday's *Daily Mail* revelation that the nanny had been helped with a second visa application – this time for a holiday in Austria," a story which sadly had nothing to do with anything.

The *Sun*, which has spent the last five months sycophantically brown-nosing the adulterous politician, was for once unable to claim it was they wot won it and had to settle instead for a spot of front-page cross promotion: "Emotional Mr Blunkett, blind from birth, wept as he spoke to Sky News's political editor Adam Boulton on TV."

As Amanda Platell, sacked from the *Sunday Express* for intrusive coverage of politicians' private lives, waxed lyrical in the *Mail* on the "poor souls, those poor children who will be defined for the rest of their lives by this scandal" (an opinion which appeared just a few pages after two large pictures of one of the poor souls in question, his identity only perfunctorily obscured), it was left to the *Guardian* to inject a rare dose of reality in one of its headlines: "Blunkett: Press Coverage 'Garbage'".

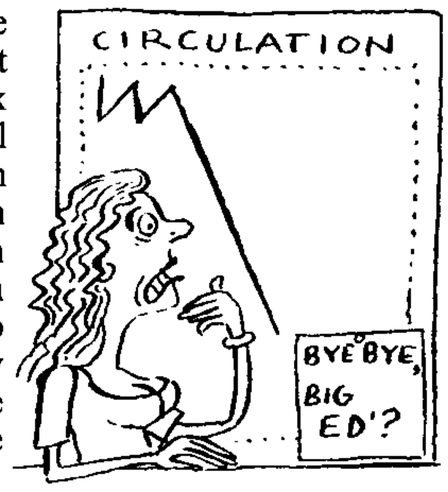
JUST FANCY THAT!

"David Blunkett went into this with his eyes wide open."

– Trevor Kavanagh, political editor of the Sun, Talksport Radio, 16 December.

HACKWATCH AWARDS 2004

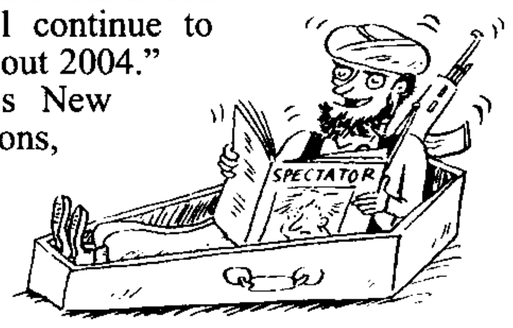
MOST TASTEFUL HEADLINES *SUN* EDITRIX Rebekah Wade has been on unrivalled form all year, which may explain why sales of the paper plummeted to their lowest level since 1974. Harold Shipman's suicide was celebrated with the front-page splash "SHIP SHIP HOORAY" – an utterly baffling formulation since no one ever called him Ship. Less than a week after police announced that no footballer would face charges over the "roasting" incident at the Grosvenor hotel, the *Sun* reported on a new American "orgasm machine" under the banner headline: "It was like having sex with a whole football team". And when Brian Clough's death was juxtaposed with the beheading of an American kidnap victim in Iraq, how did she headline the Clough story? "Bye Bye, Big 'Ead."



MYSTIC MOGG AWARD SIMON HEFFER cheekily stole William Rees-Mogg's mantle with his *Daily Mail* column on 17 January: "Mr Hoon is expected to be history as soon as the Hutton report is published in 11 days' time."

But the great Mogg grabbed it back nine days later with this eerily prescient double prediction in the *Times*: "The Hutton report is likely to criticise the government as well as the BBC… Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, will have to resign." From that moment on, both Hoon and the government knew they had nothing to fear.

MYSTIC MARK AWARD "ANOTHER SIX weeks of insurgency [in Iraq] sounds about right, after which it will peter out… Osama bin Laden: he will continue to be dead throughout 2004." – Mark Steyn's New Year predictions, *Spectator*, 27 December 2003.



ETHICS GIRL AWARD BARBARA AMIEL, aka Lady Black, wins for her fearless savaging of the "unrepentant" Greg Dyke, who had affirmed his faith in Andrew Gilligan's probity without investigating it thoroughly. "That deserved an apology," she wrote on 2 February. "If Mr Dyke can't see it, I'm stymied as to what ethical advice anyone can give him." Poor Barbara, who was sacked by the *Telegraph* soon afterwards, has remained ethically stymied ever since. A 513-page investigation by Hollinger's board found that the company "was used as a piggy bank for the Blacks", and that shareholders had unwittingly paid for such essential corporate expenses as Barbara's handbags ($2,463), exercise equipment ($2,083), opera tickets ($2,785), "silverware for the Blacks' corporate jet" ($3,530), "Summer Drinks" ($24,950) and a "Happy Birthday, Barbara" dinner party at New York's La Grenouille Restaurant ($42,870).

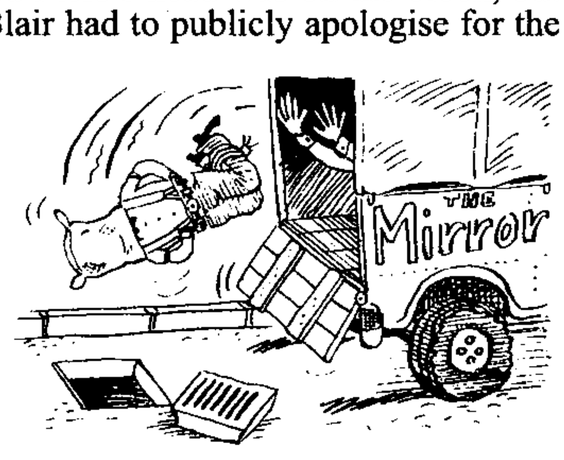
ORDER OF THE BLACK NOSE "SIR, I WOULD like to echo Mark Steyn's praise for Conrad Black as owner of the *Telegraphs* and the *Spectator*. He has been a superb proprietor… It is hard to see any future owner matching his generous record." – Letter from William Shawcross, *Spectator*, 21 February, six months before Hollinger itself accused Black of running a "corporate kleptocracy".

SCOOP OF THE YEAR THE COVETED statuette goes for the umpteenth time to legendary investigative hack Gordon Thomas, whose previous triumphs include the revelation that Terry Waite was murdered in the Lebanon, that Robert Maxwell was killed by Israeli frogmen and that Colonel Gaddafi has fathered the world's first cloned baby. This year's winner was a front-page splash for the *Sunday Express* on 22 February, "World Exclusive: BIN LADEN TRAPPED LIKE A RAT", in which Thomas disclosed that British SAS troops had the Al Qaeda chief surrounded and "are poised to seize him in his mountain lair". Ten months on, the story is still a world exclusive – in that no paper has seen fit to follow it up.

JOINED-UP EDITING AWARD CONGRATULATIONS TO the *Daily Express*, which on 26 March ran a shock-horror story headlined "Young will pay for obesity epidemic" – only one page before a special offer of a "FREE KIDS' MEAL FOR EVERY READER AT BURGER KING".

TOSH AND BECKS PRIZE WHICH DOWNMARKET rag printed the most witless drivel about David Beckham? Step forward the tabloid *Times*, which on 17 April ran a long piece by psychoanalyst Darian Leader. "Has he been with anyone other than himself?" the shrink wondered. "He may have been with Rebecca Loos and Sarah Marbeck but, for any Freudian, the thing about those choices is that 'ReBECca' and 'MarBECk' have a 'BEC' in them." Three days later, to show it was no fluke, the *Times* had a front-page story by sports hack Simon Barnes on the "Buddhist humility" of Beckham's new look. Ever since childhood, Barnes reported, "various Beckham avatars have sported haircuts that speak of cuteness, toughness, independence, artistry: all have spoken the truth." In the more upmarket *Daily Star*, news of the haircut was relegated to page 8.

MORON OF THE YEAR TRADITIONALLY THIS title goes to Piers "Morgan" Moron and the judges saw no reason to change the habit now, after a year when he rushed into print with a set of photos which even a congenital half-wit could see were faked. But they awarded a Highly Commended to his mate Charlie Whelan for a piece in *PR Week*: "I never believed Piers's head was on the block, but when Tony Blair had to publicly apologise for the behaviour of our boys, there was no doubt the editor's job was safe." This appeared on 14 May – the day Moron was sacked.



"MANY A TRUE WORD" AWARD "ONE OF THE exciting things about getting older is that some day soon I might acquire a toyboy. When not slinking around hotel rooms, we can go to Wembley Stadium and listen to boy bands." – Kimberley Fortier, *Daily Mail*, 11 March.

"My father's father's father was a romantic Turkish politician who ran a small but distinguished conservative magazine, and whose career ended in a series of misjudgments that were romantic and certainly conservative, but unwise and sometimes reckless." – Boris Johnson, *Spectator*, 27 March 2004.

"The Posh and Becks story makes a disgusting spectacle… Usually, someone comes out of a sexual imbroglio looking relatively shining. But in this instance, all and sundry are covered in mud, particularly Mrs Beckham. Whatever became of dignity, discretion and keeping your glossy head down when your famous husband strays?" – Petronella Wyatt, *Spectator*, 24 April 2004.

LUNCHTIME O'GOEBBELS AWARD THE TROPHY GOES once again to Taki, who clinched it last year with a *Spectator* column identifying black people as the root of all evil. The highlight of his 2004 portfolio was an *Evening Standard* review of Annabel Goldsmith's memoirs which included this charming tribute: "Had she been born a bit earlier and a German, the Führer would have awarded her the Fatherland's highest decoration for breeding beautiful, Aryan-looking children."

This seems unlikely, given that three of those children were fathered by a Jew, but once Taki is on his pet subject of eugenics there's no stopping him. He also noted that the offspring of Annabel and Sir James "are breeding like Sir Jimmy, which is a very good thing. England needs fewer immigrants and more attractive natives". In his drink-fuddled state, Taki forgot that he is himself one of those "immigrants" and that the child he singled out for special praise – Jemima – was married to, er, Imran Khan.

PHIL SPACE AWARD SIR MAX HASTINGS takes the honours for the second consecutive year after producing dozens of gushing *Daily Mail* features on the joys of skiing, Scrabble, Christmas, vegetable gardening, scuba diving – and indeed the joys of joy, in a 2,000-word essay which reached the startlingly original conclusion that "happiness can be wonderfully infectious". And, at a pound a word, wonderfully lucrative.

REGIONAL PRESS AWARD STEP FORWARD Liverpool *Daily Post* editor Jane Wolstenholme, who led the outcry against the *Spectator*'s "outdated, breathtakingly unfair [and] just plain unpleasant" comments on her city. "Contrary to the image you present of paranoid, self-pitying and defeated people," she wrote in an open letter to Boris Johnson, "the Liverpudlians I meet are self-confident, optimistic, proud…"

This was less than a month after she ran an editorial praising the "disarming candour" of a speech by Liverpool city council's chief executive Sir David Henshaw: "Sir David has aired opinions which may leave some people feeling slighted, even wounded. But if it goads them into action, not one word has been spoken out of place." What had Henshaw done to earn her approval? He described Liverpool as, er, "the most mind-bogglingly awful and whingeing place, where the glass is always half-empty"!

WORST BLUNDER THE LAURELS GO to the *Sunday Express* for accidentally reprinting an anti-Arab tirade by Robert Kilroy-Silk which it had first run nine months earlier. The second time it appeared, one or two readers actually noticed and made a fuss. The consequence? The BBC fired Kilroy, thus prompting him to join UKIP and stand for the European parliament. If only the entire *Sunday Express* staff weren't so dozy, we wouldn't now have to endure constant appearances on *Question Time* and *Any Questions* by the permatanned buffoon.

BEST BLUNDER THE LAURELS GO to the *Sunday Express* for accidentally reprinting Robert Kilroy-Silk's anti-Arab tirade. If the paper's staff weren't so heroically dozy, the BBC wouldn't have axed his daytime TV show – and we would have missed the equally glorious spectacle of the permatanned buffoon getting pelted with slurry.

ACCORDING to the *Times*, David Blunkett can still "draw on a deep reservoir of good will" from supporters. "He spent last night having dinner with one of his oldest friends, the Rev Alan Billings, a vicar in the Lake District, who said it was his duty to take Mr Blunkett's mind off the subject that the rest of the country is talking about."

But then Blunkett also has a deep reservoir of good will towards Billings, who was his deputy leader on Sheffield city council in the 1980s – as he has demonstrated continually since Labour won the 1997 election.

In October 1997, as education secretary, Blunkett appointed him to the board of the Funding Agency for Schools. In March 1999, when Blunkett needed a new schools adjudicator to take responsibility for school reorganisations and closures, he decided the vicar from the Lake District was just the chap for this job too.

After the 2001 election Blunkett became home secretary – and suddenly his new department discovered the talents of the Rev. Alan Billings, who within a year had been appointed to the home office's "community cohesion panel". As if all that weren't enough of a workload for a busy clergyman who is also director of the centre for ethics and religion at Lancaster University, in August this year David Blunkett was "very pleased to announce" that a vacancy on the youth justice board had been filled by… guess who.

"THE potential for a large-scale debacle which harms the government is great," wrote Jack Straw to David Blunkett, in a leaked letter on the subject on ID cards, just over a year ago.

As the identity cards bill starts its progress through parliament, it's a letter well worth revisiting to see how many of the problems have been resolved.

One problem Straw raises which clearly hasn't been solved is that of how to tackle visitors to the UK from the Republic of Ireland. With the open border arrangements between north and south and at least a million Irish citizens living in the UK, the cards could be rendered entirely impractical unless Dublin introduces its own ID scheme. After all, *anyone* stopped and asked for their card could simply tell the police they are visiting from Cork or Kerry and go on their merry way.

Furthermore, under the Good Friday agreement, people in Northern Ireland can opt for either a British or Irish passport and any requirement that they declare themselves British by being forced to hold a UK ID card would probably be ruled unlawful.

BETHNAL Green MP (but for how long?) Oona King has infuriated Labour MEPs past and present with her claim that one of them offered her "£10,000 for sex".

Since both the *Mail on Sunday* and *Evening Standard* printed pictures of all of the male Labour MEPs who were in parliament at the time when Oona was but a humble researcher, all are hopping mad that they are now in the frame. Somewhat oddly Oona took nearly 13 years to recall the incident – an incident that was investigated at the highest level in the Labour party at the time but that was suddenly and inexplicably dropped.

Oona's former colleagues are demanding that she name and shame the individual concerned to clear the air.

WORRIED that the housing market might be about to collapse, bringing down much of the economy and Gordon Brown's economic reputation with it, the last thing the treasury wants is a spanner thrown in the works of the house-buying and mortgage business.

There is a risk, however, that this might be just what the government has engineered with the introduction of mortgage regulation last month.

The financial services authority's 1,000 pages of new rules governing mortgages are so complex that a number of lenders have had to delay deals while they struggle to implement them. Many in the market believe the regulations accounted for the dangerously dramatic fall in new mortgages in November.

The treasury is paying the price for a record of procrastination on mortgages. For years it refused to regulate the business, relying on the industry's voluntary "mortgage code" to ensure fair play, despite evidence from consumer groups that millions of customers were being ripped off, often without even knowing it.

In 2000 the then economic secretary Melanie Johnson finally announced that mortgage products would be regulated but those selling them would not. A year later the treasury changed its mind and decided to regulate the salesmen too. Three years after that, and an age since calls were first made for mortgage regulation, the FSA has finally set out how it will do it.

Throughout this time the mortgage and housing market were booming and could easily have withstood the introduction of even the most bureaucratic rulebook. But as the market now teeters on the brink the FSA, with perfect timing, has finally leapt into action.

BENEATH that bluff exterior John Prescott is a sensitive, not to say touchy soul, as right-to-buy campaigner Ricky Rennalls has discovered.

Rennalls has been distributing leaflets in London protesting at provisions in the housing bill, which received royal assent last month, drastically reducing the discounts available to council tenants who wish to buy their homes.

The leaflets are headlined "John Scrooge Prescott" and include Rennalls' contact details, including his mobile telephone number. Imagine Mr Rennalls' surprise when his mobile rang and it was the deputy prime minister himself on the line!

"This is John Prescott here, I see you lot call me Scrooge," began the DPM. Rennalls tells the *Eye*: "Prescott was on the phone for 25 minutes trying to intimidate and bully me, calling me 'immoral' for informing tenants about the right-to-buy content of the housing bill. His tone was aggressive and I felt he probably would have punched me if we had been in the same room."

A spokesman at the office of the deputy prime minister said he could not confirm or deny whether the conversation took place. "Mr Prescott has numerous telephone conversations every day," he said. Perhaps the next one should be to an anger management counsellor!

Number crunchings.

£5,000

■ Amount supermodel Sophie Anderton claims to have been paid for sex by Italian businessman this year

£10,000

■ Amount MP Oona King claims to have been offered for sex by Labour MEP 10 years ago

ELLESMERE Port MP Andrew Miller has infuriated the brothers and sisters in his old union, Amicus, by throwing his weight behind an audacious bid by Irish businessman Sean Quinn to build the biggest glass producing plant in Europe with the help of imported, Irish non union labour in his patch.

Miller, who once worked for Amicus before becoming a Labour MP, has been strangely absent from Amicus picket lines outside the planned plant. He also seems remarkably coy about the fact that former Amicus deputy general secretary, Roger "currant bun" Lyons is still listed as being a member of his House of Commons staff.

The plant in Elton, near Chester, threatens other glass producing companies in the area who recognise unions like Amicus and tend to pay well above the minimum wage. Remarkably, three quarters of the factory has already been built, despite concerns that emission levels will be twice the government guideline level and even though Chester city council is still deliberating planning consents.

If Miller isn't worried about turning his back on the brothers, perhaps he should be more worried about local reaction. Residents are furious: not only at the possible pollution but because their lives will be ruined by the noise of innumerable lorries.

'Backbiter'

Warballs

● "Kids are finally unplugging hi-tech consoles and going back to traditional family games… Toy experts believe the backdrop of global terrorism and international insecurity may be fuelling the demand." – **The *Sun*.**

● "On 11 September 2001 as the Twin Towers tragedy played out on television, I decided to act, to make that phone call to the Royal College of Art; taking up an invitation by Eileen Cooper RA to do a Post Experience Programme in Fine Art Printmaking." – **Website of Holly Johnson, formerly of Frankie Goes to Hollywood.**

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELDS

WHILE Tony Blair went to a school gym and posed in a tracksuit while promising to double the amount of sport in schools, it was business as usual on Britain's disappearing playing fields.

Take the new £28m hobbit hole-style North Bristol Institute secondary school, for example, which is to be sunk into a hillside and hidden with plants in order to avoid creating an eyesore in the middle of a conservation area. It's a lovely idea in itself – except that Redland, the hillside in question, is the last remaining playing field in the area.

Parent campaign groups are divided; having spent the past 20 years asking for a new school with modern facilities, many are loathe to kick up a fuss over the lost outdoor sports and play spaces. Others, with the support of the local amenities society, say that not only is the site already inadequate for outdoor space, but there will be no room for later expansion if the school is popular and successful.

In fact, although there will be a handful of recreation areas around the school, there will not even be enough room on the site for all the school's sports facilities and pitches which were included in plans approved by the city council last month, but are mainly to be located on another site a kilometre away. This means teams and classes will have to be bussed back and forth, causing extra traffic through a residential area, or walk, wasting most of their PE lesson time.

THE GREAT JARVIS FIASCO

WHY has Partnerships UK (PUK), the privatised treasury-funded PFI promoter, been so anxious in recent years to persuade other countries of the attractions of the private finance initiative? A clue emerges from the background of the company that has come to the rescue of Jarvis.

Hochtief, the German firm that has taken over Jarvis's PFI bidding business, and with it "preferred bidder status" on three potentially lucrative schools PFI projects, got its break in education PFIs a couple of months ago when it signed the first such contract in Germany: an 800m euro deal to refurbish 100 schools in North Rhine Westphalia. The German state was ably assisted in coming to the decision to use PFI by PUK, giving the company a domestic platform from which to win schools PFI deals elsewhere.

Hochtief is not the only continental company looking to step into Jarvis's shoes. It has also emerged that French builder Vinci is favourite to take on a number of other Jarvis contracts where construction is in progress.

So it's now becoming clearer why PUK has spent so much time persuading other countries to adopt the PFI: when pisspoor British companies like Jarvis can't deliver on their contracts, there might be foreign ones to step into the breach.

THE suspended contracts and partly-built schools that trail in Jarvis's wake have prompted calls from various quarters for a government promise that these projects won't be abandoned.

Demands like this put the treasury in a tricky position, however, as any such promise would give the lie to the essential PFI myth that the risk on contracts stays with the private sector. Only major national PFI scandals warrant such attention and the chances of the government stepping in, for example to resurrect the Norfolk schools PFI deal that the council pulled out of in November, remain nil.

TWO firms that aren't enjoying the Jarvis fiasco one little bit are its principal bankers, Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and Barclays. They are desperately trying to get the company to sell its existing PFI contracts, along with its stake in London Underground PPP consortium Tubelines, to prevent the company going under.

If the worst came to the worst and Jarvis did go bust, the bankers would be left not only with a financial loss but also the difficult task of making sure several school and hospital projects were completed – not jobs Barclays and RBS traditionally excel at.

Sympathy for the banks may be shortlived, however, as they are hardly innocent victims of the latest scandal. Both make enormous profits from PFI, and RBS counts among its directors former treasury mandarin Sir Steve Robson, privatisation guru to the Thatcher government, architect of "new" Labour's PFI revolution and the brains behind Partnerships UK. RBS's and Barclays' interest in promoting the PFI initiative are also behind their major shareholdings in PUK – they own 12 percent of it between them.

If the Jarvis fire-sale doesn't produce sufficient readies, the banks that have done so much to promote the form of public service procurement that "transfers risk to the private sector" may soon face the uncomfortable reality of what this means.

Councillor Coleman has argued that the council's case against lap dancing was strengthened by the publication of a report, which it commissioned, which argued that most men go to the cubs for sexual services.

Scottish Licensed Trade

Number crunchings

1,400 years

■ Time the office of lord chancellor existed before government decided to abolish it

18 months

■ Time it took government to quietly abandon the idea

Down on the Farm

FOR sheer ingenuity you have to hand it to those officials who sit in Brussels dreaming up new regulations for the farming community. Their latest stroke of genius is to ban farmers from taking tractors on to their fields when it is raining.

If there are puddles of water anywhere on a field more than 20 metres from the gate, it will be an offence to enter the field with any machinery. Thus in a wet spring, it could become illegal to plough or sow any field for weeks on end. In a wet summer, such as the one we have just had, it could become an offence to harvest crops until they are beyond saving.

So outraged by this new rule is Jim Hosking, a well-known Cornish farmer, that he has written to farming minister Lord Whitty describing it as "farcical, unethical and unacceptable".

The claimed purpose of the new EU rule is "to protect the soil". But Mr Hosking calls it "a gross and disgraceful affront to the knowledge, skills and judgement of farmers… Your support for such utter nonsense," he tells Lord Whitty, "clearly shows that you have little regard for the basic principles of farming."

When the rule was first announced, Lord Whitty insisted it was not a case of "bureaucracy gone mad". It was essential to ensure that "the farmer operates in a way that gets the support of society as a whole, and does the basic job of keeping the land in good condition." But Mr Hosking, in his puzzlement, has perhaps failed to appreciate its true purpose.

The real explanation for the rule can be seen from the context in which it is being introduced. It is part of the elaborate system of rules which surround the EU's new "single farm payment" scheme. The central principle is that farmers should no longer be paid to produce food, only on the basis of how much land they farm. But they will only be given these subsidies if they can show they have complied with a mass of new "cross-compliance" conditions – such as the ban on using tractors in wet fields. The penalty for breaking any rule is that you lose all your subsidies.

The hidden agenda behind this new system (known, after the EU commissioner who devised it, as "Fischler's poison pill") is that the EU is desperate to find ways to slash its £30bn a year agricultural subsidy bill, still the largest item in the EU budget.

The trick is first to make farming subsidies even more unpopular by withdrawing subsidies from food production so that people will ask why farmers are paid so much for doing nothing. Second, you tell farmers that unless they comply with all the legislation, their subsidies will be withdrawn. Thirdly, you dream up all sorts of ridiculous new rules which it will be impossible for them to comply with. You then have a perfect excuse for not paying them a penny!

Finally, throw in the incentive that national governments are allowed to keep 25 percent of all the money they save in this way (the rest going back to Brussels) and you will see why Lord Whitty and colleagues are so keen on this brilliant new system, and why they will defend even something as daft as prohibiting farmers from using their tractors when it is raining.

'Muckspreader'

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

HOPES that the new European Commission under Jose Manuel Barroso would take a tougher line than its predecessors in fighting sloppy accounting in the European Union are already faltering.

After a group of MEPs wrote to anti-fraud commissioner Siim Kallas, the Estonian Kallas agreed to a meeting with Marta Andreasen, the whistleblowing accounting officer who was sacked by the previous commission for pointing out that the EU's book-keeping has more holes in it than a colander.

Andreasen felt a personal meeting was the only way a newcomer to the EU "could learn what my views are"; and the MEPs agreed: not least because the commission website says Kallas is supposed to be concerned with "the fight against fraud". Alas, the meeting was cancelled at the last minute after Kallas was warned off it by the commission's lawyers – aware, no doubt, of Andreasen's pending claim for damages for wrongful dismissal which is making its way through the Court of First Instance in Luxembourg.

The only "good" news for Andreasen and those MEPs who are concerned that whistleblowers' voices should be heard is that the new commission has at least deigned to reconsider the decision of the previous administration to sack her.

DO normal safety rules apply at European Commission-owned sites that handle nuclear material? Not in northern Holland where citizens living near the commission's joint research centre at Petten are aghast at the centre's immunity from prosecution over safety violations.

The Euratom centre is set among sand dunes at Zijpe where NRG, or the Nuclear Research & Consultancy Group, offers a range of services in the nuclear and medical fields and supplies medical isotopes to more than 60 percent of European hospitals.

According to the Dutch daily, *de Volkskrant*, a police raid last year found serious safety violations, including dangerous systems for storing toxic waste. However, proceedings against the plant came to nothing because of the legal immunity enjoyed by European commission establishments.

Dutch government ministers and MPs want to know how an institution committing environmental crimes can remain untouched. One MP, Meneer van der Ham, astonished by the protection given Euratom, said: "Whoever is immune can assume a relaxed position when it comes to sticking to rules. And in a nuclear surrounding [*sic*] that is exactly what should not be allowed to happen."

Given the way other Euro institutions seem to remain above the law (cf Eurostat), Euratom's freedom to break the law and get away with it is hardly surprising.

MEDIA NEWS

A CONSPIRACY theory has taken hold at Five Live about the mooted move to Manchester.

Director-general Mark Thompson insists it's designed to convince the department for culcha, media 'n' sport that the BBC is serious about its greater commitment to "the regions". But given that most of the output will remain in the hands of the same old producers, albeit uprooted from posh London to posh Manchester, the move north is unlikely to be apparent in what goes on air.

After all, Radio 4 spent £600,000 reinstating the northern editions of *You and Yours* and *Woman's Hour* without attracting very much attention at all. Investment in the regions elsewhere remains almost non-existent.

Equally puzzling is Thompson's insistence that a new "state of the art" broadcast centre is needed when one is already being built at Broadcasting House and another lies empty gathering dust at White City. Cynics suggest the move is all talk and that as soon as charter renewal is in the bag, the idea will be quietly dropped.

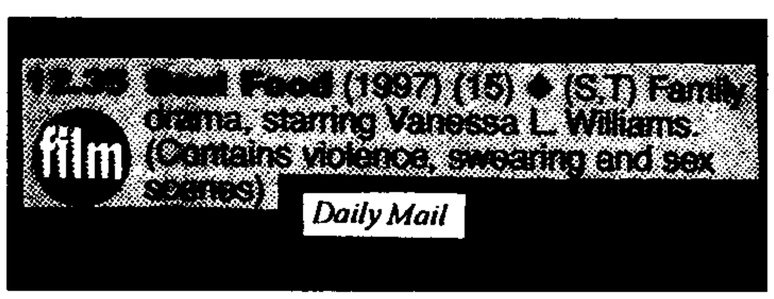
"FIRST Details Emerge of Where Axe Will Fall", revealed *Ariel* following the announcement of budget cuts and redundancies at the BBC.

So hats off to the Beeb's "corporate social responsibility centre" which placed a lavish, full colour glossy pull-out headlined "Value Added Impact" in the same issue, including photos of the team promoting its latest report (which is available in full and online to all staff).

UNIONS representing the 2,900 non-programme making staff who will be axed in the first round of Mark Thompson's cuts have pledged to "resist at all levels" the redundancies.

No one could argue that those whose jobs are on the line are anything but very busy people. Indeed, in the week that the job cuts were announced, one *Eye* reader who works in television received no fewer than 17 pieces of paperwork from the corporation, including a description of how to present an invoice, a checklist for invoices, a blank sample invoice, a completed sample invoice, three copies of a purchase order and a copy of the corporation's freelance terms and conditions.

All these resulted from his most recent engagement – a single day's freelancing for the BBC.


12.50 Cold Feet (1997) (15) ♦ (S,T) Family drama, starring Vanessa L. Williams. (Contains violence, swearing and sex scenes)
film
Daily Mail

WHAT does the BBC really think about ratings? Well, it depends how good or bad they are.

When Strictly Come Dancing attracted far more viewers than ITV's *X*-Factor, a BBC spokesman was wheeled out to say this was "pretty incredible".

But when BBC One's share of viewers was shown to have plunged to a record low, dropping below a 25 percent audience share for the first time, the same spokesman blamed the whole thing on a new "commitment to public service broadcasting" as opposed to chasing ratings.

DUMB BRITAIN

The Weakest Link, BBC2

Anne Robinson: Name the Empress of Russia, who ruled between 1762 and 1796, famous for the number of her lovers.

Contestant: Boadicea.

Robinson: Which survey, completed in 1086, was referred to in order to decide a legal dispute 896 years later?

Contestant: The Great Fire of London.

Robinson: In English history, the battle of Naseby in 1643 was fought in which war?

Contestant: The Crimean War.

Robinson: According to the Bible, what city was destroyed along with Gomorrah?

Contestant: Atlantis.

ONE casualty of the BBC cutbacks will be its popular Get Writing website, which offers would-be writers a chance to post stories, poems or scripts and comment on each other's work.

In addition, writers on shows like *EastEnders* offer online workshops and guidance. Not surprisingly Get Writing has been popular with potential writers of all ages and, perversely, this is probably why it is doomed.

A letter to the BBC begging the corporation to reconsider brought a reply from the interactive drama and entertainment department that "unfortunately, Get Writing no longer fits with Learning's strategy or ID&E's increased focus, with limited resources, on the under 25 audience. Therefore the project will come to an end, on or before 31 March 2005."

It seems the BBC is under the impression that no one over 25 uses the internet or wants to learn about writing or indeed anything for that matter.

"ITN has learned tonight of new allegations involving Home Secretary David Blunkett and a second visa application..." announced a smug looking Mark Austin on ITV News on 14 December, before going live to Nick Robinson in Downing Street.

How how did ITN "learn" of this dramatic "scoop"? "Well Mark, the allegations are made here in tomorrow's *Daily Mail*," explained the political editor holding a copy of the paper to camera.

Number crunchings

1m ■ Drop in viewers between previous series final of *Big Brother* and most recent

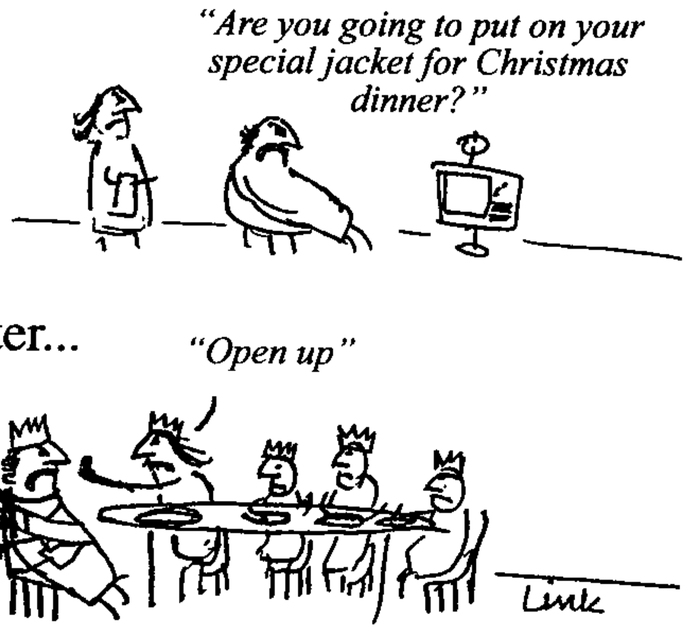
4m ■ Drop in viewers between previous series final of *I'm A Celebrity...* and most recent

12 ■ Number of reality TV shows which will start in January

GOING LIVE

GMTV went live to one of its hackettes outside a deserted home office at 8am for the latest "news" on a British army captain's bid for UK citizenship.

But why bother? "There'll probably be a file dusted off at 0900 this morning," predicted the desperate reporter.



CHRISTMAS HUMBUG SPECIAL

"DO-GOODERS are out to turn Santa into Satan," the *Sun* declared on 10 December. "Jovial Father Christmas is HATED by the politically correct brigade, so today the *Sun* calls on readers to help save the old boy from the sack in our Save Our Christmas campaign."

The festive crusade was prompted by reports that a shopping centre in Llanelli had installed a surveillance camera in its grotto because of fears that its Santa might be accused of being a paedophile – and that children's charity Kidscape was advising parents not to let their children sit on Father Christmas's knee because "there's no need to take the risk".

Could this wariness be in any way be related to the way Rebekah Wade, as editor of both the *Sun* and previously the *News of the World*, has spent the last few years convincing her readers that paedophiles lurk in every corner and running endless stories about "Santa Pervs"?

Now, however, anyone who claims such fears are "a sad sign of the times" – as did the manager of the offending Welsh shopping centre – is denounced by the *Sun* as a "killjoy Santa sleigher".

THE *Daily Mail* has launched a belligerent front-page crusade against "Christmas killjoys", those miserable employers who aren't holding office parties.

As it happens, lower-order editorial staff at the *Mail* itself didn't attend the paper's Christmas party at Claridges this year. Not out of fear that Paul Dacre might terrify them by dressing up as Santa, but because they weren't deemed worthy: only journalistic grandees received invitations. Bah, humbug!

AN END of year quiz: whose claims about military activities in Iraq were "exposed as rubbish" and "bullshit", was called "an ultimate shameless opportunist" with "a world-class brass neck... a world-class stupidity" and a "chinless smirk" with a "rare ability to ensure that whatever goes wrong is never, ever his fault?"

No, not Piers Morgan, who was fired as editor of the *Daily Mirror* last May after refusing to take responsibility for printing fake photographs of British soldiers in Iraq, but Geoff Hoon, the secretary of state for defence. And who was making these accusations? None other than Piers Morgan, latest recruit to the *Evening Standard* where he penned his first column on 14 December.

Teachers fear they will have to resort to strike action if controversial plans by Education Secretary Charles Clarke to force schools to accept disruptive pupils – some as young as 100 – are enforced.

The Gazette

Legal News

ALLEGED mercenary mastermind Simon Mann this month delivered to a Guernsey court a statement denying any involvement in an alleged March coup plot in Equatorial Guinea.

Mann said he had been tortured into making an earlier confession apparently admitting his guilt. He said there was no proper basis to allegations by Equatorial Guinea linking him or friends Mark Thatcher and Ely Calil to any conspiracy. He also complained that Henry Page of British law firm Pennington's, who acts for Equatorial Guinea, had "completely invented the statement that he has attributed to me."

Most British newspapers are shy of criticising Page, on whom they have depended for their coverage of the story. Although, in September, Page's client's counsel in Guernsey said he had been instructed by Page to say he, Page, had not released a specific piece of financial information to the press, pretty much every newspaper, radio station and TV network in the land has received other information from him. Page has provided documents, arranged visas and fixed interviews for the many hacks ready to swallow the Equatorial Guinea government's colourful version of events.

But if the media has been overly beholden to the Pennington's man, learned friends and others may be less kind. In South Africa, Judge Deon Van Zyl was unimpressed with Page's contribution to action against the boy Mark: "A person who calls himself a solicitor of the supreme court of England and Wales and avocat at the Paris Bar has given us a document which is shocking in [the] extreme," he said. "If this is the nature of the legal advice the Equatorial Guineans are getting, I would suggest very strongly they get another legal adviser."

In Lebanon a judge ridiculed submissions by Page – based extensively on media reports many of which he had helped facilitate. And in Equatorial Guinea, where more than 20 alleged plotters were convicted last month for their part in what the government claims was an international conspiracy against oil-rich dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, Amnesty International and the International Bar Association have pointed to glaring deficiencies and abuses in a process Page described as meeting all international standards.

Why the media were ready to reproduce as their main source for the coup allegations – with no independent corroboration – legally suspect statements extracted from two of Africa's most grotesque prisons is something their lawyers may one day have to explain.

Most continue to report that Simon Mann and his merry band in jail in Zimbabwe were convicted in connection with a coup plot. They were not. Most were convicted on minor immigration offences, while Mann was convicted of seeking to buy guns. The court made no judgment as to where they had planned to go when they left Harare, nor what the weapons were for. Few papers have reported that most of those convicted in Equatorial Guinea worked for a company owned by, er, the president's brother and secret service chief. That contract was not circulated by Page.

The best may be yet to come, however. In civil action in London, Page is advising Equatorial Guinea to sue the alleged masterminds of the conspiracy for damages, arguing mental stress to President Obiang. This has the defendants' lawyers rolling in the aisles – as they will be able to demand an independent psychiatric assessment of the plaintiff, who since seizing power from his own uncle, subsequently executed, has been accused by human rights groups of hundreds of deaths, running a family-led government built on brutal torture and a senate investigation of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars.

RACING NEWS

NOW the Jockey Club has dropped its disciplinary inquiry following allegations in the *News of the Screws* that former champion jockey Kieren Fallon was involved in race fixing, it seems a costly libel case will follow.

Back in March, under the headlines "THE FIXER – Fake Sheikh exposes sports scandal of the decade", the *Screws* told how two of its hacks dressed up as Arab sheikhs (yawn) had secretly recorded conversations with Fallon which purportedly revealed him to be corrupt.

It now looks likely the only fixing that can be proved was going on was on the part of the *Screws* itself.

On publication of its story the *Screws* said it had handed the taped evidence to the Jockey Club, which duly began an inquiry. Fallon's lawyers protested that both the story and the *NoW*'s evidence to the Jockey Club had deliberately withheld taped material that made it clear that Fallon was *not* prepared to be bribed. When the full transcripts were obtained by the Jockey Club, the case against Fallon did, indeed, collapse.

In 2002, the former Jockey Club head of security, John Buffham, told a *Panorama* investigation team that Fallon had been involved with Triad gangsters whilst riding in Hong Kong between 1998 and 2000. In September Fallon accepted Buffham's unreserved apology in the high court.

Fallon is also one of 25 people bailed until April in connection with a City of London police investigation into allegations of conspiracy to defraud involving the unregulated betting exchanges market. But, having sent both *Panorama* and the *News of the World* packing, Fallon must be hoping that he can ride away from this one too.

REALLY DISGUSTING STORY

DAVID SULLIVAN's *Sunday Sport* – which editor Tony Livesey always ensures is a bastion of good taste – devoted a page of its 12 December edition to the "kinky sex lives" of two "babes in Derby" as part of its regular "Saturday Night Beaver" feature.

Curiously, the picture of "Nicola Alder, 21" which illustrated her confession that "I like up the bum the best" was that of 15-year-old murder victim Martha Moxley, who was battered and stabbed to death in Connecticut in 1975.

Michael Skakel – a relative of senator Robert Kennedy – was jailed for her murder in August 2002. The photo which the *Sunday Sport* used was one issued to the media by Moxley's family at the time of the trial.

OUT OF CON-TEXT

● *By the Bog of Cats*, currently at the Wyndhams theatre, was, if its press adverts are to be believed, called "blackly comic, powerfully moving," by the *Daily Telegraph*. Except it wasn't.

What Charles Spencer actually wrote was: "Marina Carr is a writer who seeks to find a tragic and poetic grandeur in her native rural Ireland... At her best, she can be both blackly comic and powerfully moving, but at her worst she delivers little more than a ludicrously rich stew of over-heated tosh. It is the tosh that predominates here."

"It's the traditional sound of lolly in wallet"

DOING THE ROUNDS

"CLINICIANS have to trust the reports they are given and if they don't then there are real problems. It's a question of what's best for patients and for the taxpayer – and this isn't good for either."

So says consultant radiologist Andy Molyneux of the mobile MRI scanning service provided for the NHS by Alliance Medical. The £95m, five-year Alliance deal was hailed by "new" Labour last June as "a great deal for the NHS and its patients", using 12 mobile screening units to increase capacity by 15 percent. But a few months in and Alliance is at risk of going under from the weight of criticism from managers, clinicians and patients.

Trouble started last June when ex-health secretary Alan "family man" Milburn was found not to be spending more time with his kids but taking £30,000 to sit on the advisory committee of Bridgeport Capital Ltd, part owner of Alliance. Some NHS workers objected to the deal on ideological grounds, others accepted that the current waiting times for MRI scans are scandalously long and were prepared to see if Alliance could deliver.

Alas, in the first three months of Alliance, 16,317 scans were due to be carried out but only 9,406 were. Some results have been delayed for up to six weeks instead of the two-to-five days promised, and some scans have been misinterpreted, risking wrong diagnoses or treatment. In addition, the service is very selective about the patients and clinical problems it will handle, and uses inexperienced generalist radiologists – often from Belgium or Barcelona – who are not always able to interpret complex scans accurately.

As a result local NHS radiologists are having to either rescan some patients or provide second opinions on existing scans, adding substantially to their workload. Many patients have also expressed concern about the time taken for results to come through, which is also putting extra pressure on NHS units. Because Alliance is outside the clinical governance of the trusts that use its service, no one knows who will be accountable when errors are made.

As ever, the department of health is under enormous pressure from government to make the Alliance deal appear a success. It has rushed the contract in too quickly and failed to specify necessary standards or set up a system to log problems. In a letter to the DoH from the five NHS "cluster leads", who oversee the 28 strategic health authority leads, the department is criticised for failing to mention "the scale of operational problems being experienced" in its progress (*sic*) report.

In the post Bristol era, "new" Labour promised to put patient safety first, but in rushing through a private service without involving the NHS in its development or ensuring proper quality control, it has lost credibility and cooperation from the NHS. Patient care has long been compromised by a lack of radiologists in the NHS; but the solution is not to provide a competing service that duplicates work because of its inadequacies, but to invest in, and expand, the existing service.

The DoH would never accept this and, in pig-headed fashion, trusts are being put under pressure to refer patients to Alliance when their radiologists don't feel that the service is competent and the patients don't want to go there. The bottom line is that £95m has already been committed and if the contract is underused the NHS loses money. Safety is no longer important.

M.D.

off your trolley

REEVE & WAY

WHAT A NIGHT, I'M SHATTERED. IT SHOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS...
A&E
MOST OF WHAT WE SEE IS DRINK RELATED AND AVOIDABLE
YEAH...
SAME WITH US
MATERNITY WARD

SIGNAL FAILURES

Hot air Blair

COUNTRIES being lectured by Tony Blair on the need to cut greenhouse gas emissions may not realise that British transport today is as unsustainable as at any time in the last 50 years.

While the prime minister postures on the international stage, he is too scared of a backlash from big business and the media to curb growing car, lorry and air traffic in his own country. His ministers happily pronounce on smoking and smacking but give the public no meaningful message about using cars less.

The latest pre-budget statement postponed fuel-duty increases for motorists for a second time, although crude oil prices are falling. That handout was announced the day after news of yet another inflation-busting rise in rail fares.

The department of transport says there are only two sources of rail income: fare payers and taxpayers (which contradicts transport secretary Alistair Darling's insistence that the private sector is providing £70m a week). Thus fares must rise as they cover only 55 percent of rail investment (it was 75 percent five years ago).

The department forgot to say *why* the rail system needs ever more cash for its often pisspoor, expensive service. There's a clue in the most recent financial results: rail profits up at National Express by 74 percent; at Go Ahead by 64 percent; and at FirstGroup by 55 percent.

The privatised railway's priority is to squeeze bigger profits year after year from a system where capacity is largely static. Something has to give of course; but it won't be Mr Blair's beloved public-private partnerships. A prime function of the railways bill being rushed through parliament is to make it easier for the government to close rail lines, stations and "passenger networks", scrapping the formal hearings where passengers could object. Labour won't admit so close to a general election that it plans closures, but 39 percent of the bill's clauses relate to new closure procedures.

Nor will it sanction a £9.9bn high-speed railway between England's biggest cities to meet growing demand. Instead it's rolling out "route utilisation strategies" for each mainline to show how extra infrastructure can be avoided by suppressing demand, eg by scrapping the Gatwick Express.

The next east-coast mainline franchise may include a new fares strategy encouraging people to travel when there are spare seats – in other words, expect even higher peak-time fares to force people off trains and on to roads. The government also thinks extra passenger capacity will come from reduced rail freight: conveniently it has already cut support for freight trains while granting concessions to truckers (*Eye* 1106).

Mr Blair won't contemplate a new railway to cut greenhouse-gas emissions but is procuring new or widened roads costing billions of pounds. As even the Tories acknowledged a decade ago, more new highways generate yet more traffic to choke cities and towns.

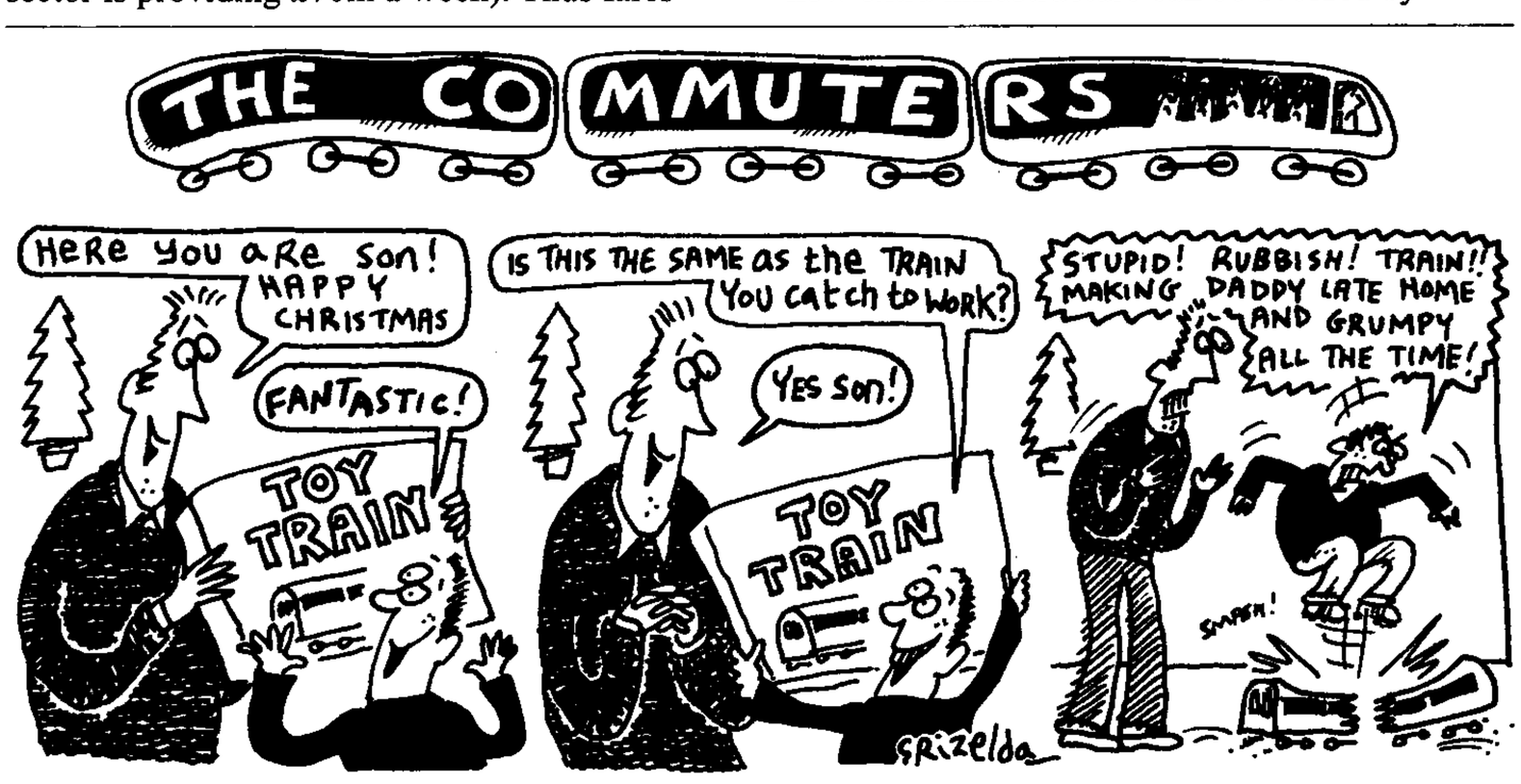
JANUARY's biggest price rise – off-peak fares up 7.2 percent – will be on National Express' Silverlink franchise.

That's no surprise to travellers between Milton Keynes and London. In September they lost their intercity trains but fares weren't reduced to compensate. An *Eye* reader who commutes first-class says Virgin was often late and dirty but provided plenty of seats, free newspapers and coffee in first class. Silverlink is often late and dirty too, its trains aren't air-conditioned and he frequently has to stand, yet the fares are going up rather than down.

Silverlink is being lined up to take over Birmingham's local lines when Central Trains is disbanded in 2006. It's only three months since Silverlink was kicked out of Birmingham and replaced by Central; several Midlands rail services were suspended for Central drivers to be trained on ex-Silverlink trains and routes (*Eye* 1109). There's no cash for urgently needed rail schemes but "new" Labour still wastes money on pointless reorganisations.

PS: In October, just after its territory was shrunk, Silverlink gained a two-year franchise extension with a 23 percent subsidy rise.

'Dr B. Ching'


THE COMMUTERS
HERE YOU ARE SON! HAPPY CHRISTMAS
FANTASTIC!
TOY TRAIN
IS THIS THE SAME AS THE TRAIN YOU CATCH TO WORK?
YES SON!
TOY TRAIN
STUPID! RUBBISH! TRAIN!! MAKING DADDY LATE HOME AND GRUMPY ALL THE TIME!
SMASH!
GRIZELDA

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

STADE AND NARROW

EARLY in 2002 *Eye* 1051 reported that "councillors in run-down Hastings are preening themselves at news that the town is to receive £400m in regeneration dosh from the EU, leading to fanciful talk of the drugs, unemployment and single-parenting capital of the south coast being transformed into 'Britain's Barcelona'."

They can relax on The Ramblas for a while yet. For while Hastings's Labour-dominated council has proved adept at shovelling other people's money into the pockets of assorted consultants, precious little regeneration has come about or looks likely to any time soon.

The "flagship" project, the Stade Maritime – a visitor centre and fancy fish restaurant – has died a death after consuming some £450,000 in fees and public consultations. One big problem was that the council discovered it didn't actually own the foreshore land earmarked for the project, as it thought; another is that the architects, trendy Scottish-Japanese outfit Ushida Findlay, went bust six months ago – although the council hasn't bothered to mention this. The district auditor is looking into multiple complaints about the fiasco.

Meanwhile the council has formed a "not for profit" company, Sea Space, in partnership with the South East England Development Agency, to push on with other projects. Sea Space has compulsory purchase powers to buy council land at below market rates, but not pay for it until work begins. Council leader Jeremy Birch is Hastings's portfolio holder for regeneration and finance and also a director of Sea Space. So when Sea Space is awarded planning permission or allowed to buy property on the cheap, there is clearly no conflict of interest.

● **CHRISTMAS came early this year for Lambeth council's top managers, who are to receive a 15 percent pay increase for "improving services to residents". This is the council whose social services department last month won a "one star" rating (out of a possible three) from the commission for social care improvement, whose housing benefit service has been judged by the benefit fraud inspectorate to have performed worse since being taken back in-house than it did when run by Crapita (blimey!) and which finds itself unable to provide a school place for every child in the borough. But there is no cause for concern, according to the council's spokesman, who says: "This is not a pay rise – in fact it is quite the opposite." Trebles all round, in that case!**

MOLE IN A HOLE

AFTER *Eye* 1102 reported on problems at Mole Valley council's Dorking swimming pool, "outsourced" to private firm Leisure Connection – a *Which?* magazine survey had concluded the swimming pool posed a "potentially serious health risk" – we received a cross letter from Conservative councillor Rosemary Dickson, who conceded that while there had been problems with cleanliness at an "old and out of date" pool, the council now had "lovely new facilities".

Yet, we hear, there are still cleanliness problems and staff and customers are not impressed by Leisure Connection's proposal to cut gym supervision and lifeguard cover, leaving the gym unmanned and only one lifeguard to cover two pools at times. The management's latest brilliant cost-saving idea is for staff to scour changing room lockers for forgotten £1 deposits.

Meanwhile Mr Ibrahim Khan of Hackney, East London, is nursing his wounds after the top bench on which he was sitting in the sauna at the borough's Britannia Leisure centre collapsed beneath him, causing bad bruising to his hand and arm and a painful blood clot in a finger. It was the *third* such collapse at the Leisure Connection-operated centre in as many months.

WAYWARD HEATH

HAYWARD'S HEATH in West Sussex is without doubt one of Britain's dullest commuter dormitory towns. So an item in the local *Mid-Sussex Times* the other day raised eyebrows. HH, the paper declared, was fast becoming a "worldwide honeymoon destination".

The *Times*'s source for this assertion was a press release from Tory-controlled Mid-Sussex district council, which said it had received an email from a Mr Gaston Lenzken of Buenos Aires, Argentina, asking for help planning his forthcoming honeymoon: "Hi dear people, I am coming to your city in February 2005 for my honeymoon and I want some brochures, information, excursions and any information by airmail that it is possible to make my trip amazing. Thank you very very much."

An *Eye* reader who checked out Mr Lenzken on Google found he had made an identical posting to the far more likely honeymoon spot of Rye in East Sussex... plus another to a site for fans of the singer Sade. "Hi Sade," wrote Gaston. "I love very much your music and dancing. I love your dancing so much I would very much it [*sic*] for you to come and visit my lap dancing club here in beautiplace Buenos Aires in Argentina. Maybe you could do dancing for us. You could be my guest and we enjoy some fun cigarettes together, yes!?"

Perhaps a little pot-crazed lap-dancing is just what Hayward's Heath needs.

● **QUOTE OF WEEK: from Bristol city councillor Judy Patterson, calling for the establishment of an officially-controlled red light area for the city. "A lot of careful thought would have to go into it," she said. "I think a 'Park and Ride' site would be suitable..."**

EDUCASHUN NEWZ

JUST last year schools minister Stephen Twigg pronounced that "Government policy is clear that popular and successful sixth forms should be celebrated not closed".

Not so in Hastings, where Sussex Learning and Skills Council plans to open a new college of further education. In order to have enough students the joint sixth forms at William Parker School and Helenswood School will be closed.

Parents and school governors are unhappy with the plans, pointing to sizeable petitions as proof of the school's popularity. As for success, the combined sixth form has better than average results for East Sussex. Losing the sixth form would also be likely to cause problems with staffing at the schools, since many secondary school teachers understandably enjoy the chance to teach their subject at A level and would seek jobs elsewhere in order to do that.

The plans go to the education secretary for approval in January. Whether he will be sending the schools some celebratory champagne or closing their sixth forms remains to be seen.

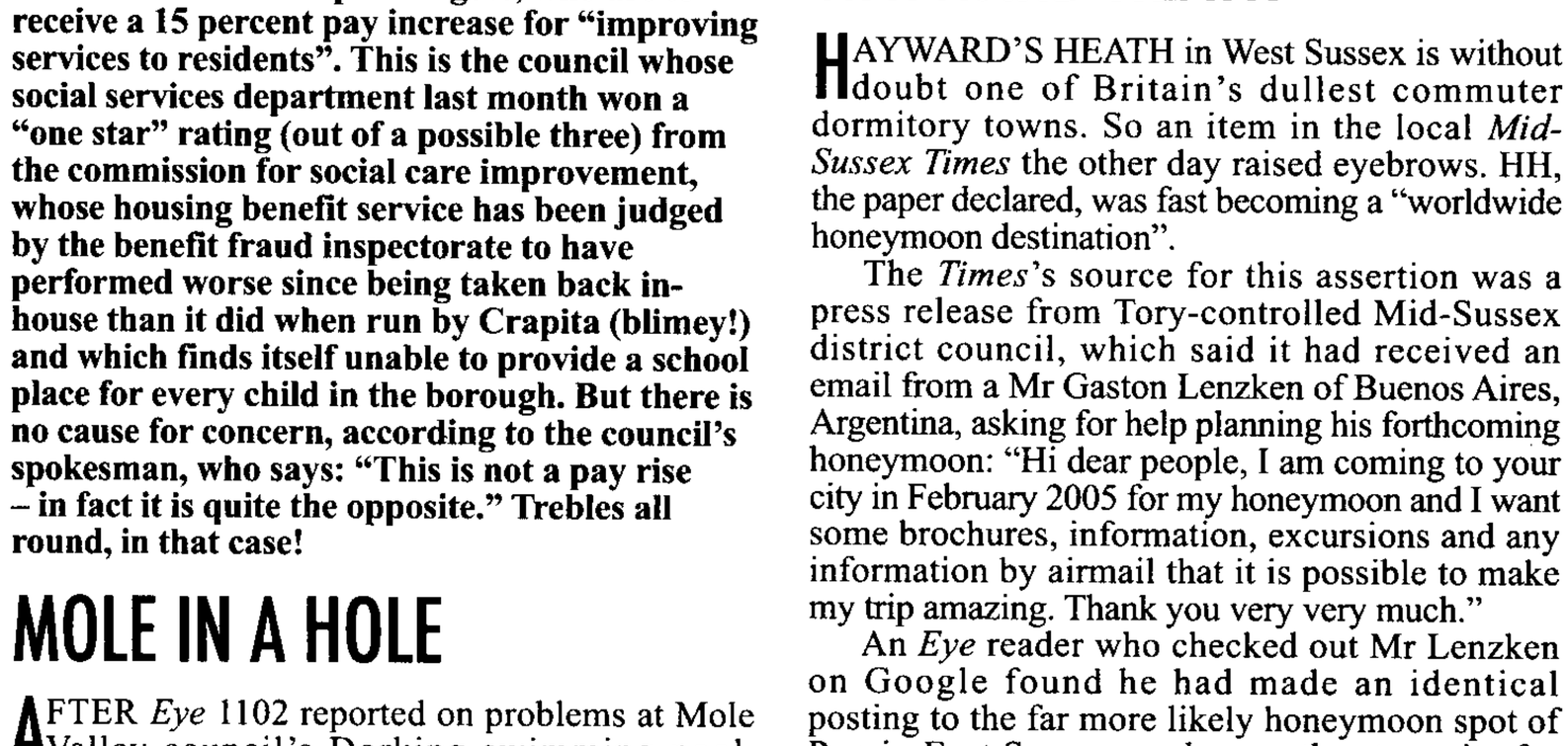
AS THE home of many of Britain's top environmental scientists and climate change researchers, the University of East Anglia (UEA) has been usefully guilt-tripping companies and local authorities into introducing sustainable policies for some time now. But the holier-than-thou approach has backfired now that the university wants to build a multi-storey car park.

Not surprisingly many of the green boffins from the double five-star school of environment sciences and the world-class Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research oppose the £12m car park scheme, but that didn't stop it from being approved by the university council. The site already has planning permission for the building which would allow an estimated 30 percent increase in traffic.

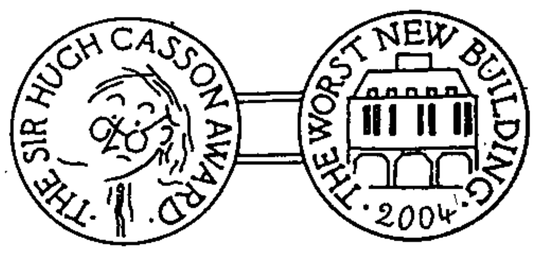
Also cheesed off are all those who have signed up to the UEA-run carbon emissions reduction initiative, "CRed", to reduce emissions by 60 percent by 2050 – including both Norfolk county and Norwich city councils.

As Tyndall Centre director Professor Mike Hulme points out, £12m would keep every single UEA student in bus passes for the next ten years. And presumably it's that kind of idea they're paying him to have.

IT'S GRIM UP THE NORTH POLE
KNIFE & PACKER
CHRISTMAS EVE
OK, GUYS, FOLLOW ME! DOWN THIS CHIMNEY!
NO WAY!
NOT ON YOUR NELLY!
DON'T WORRY, CHAPS, IT'S PERFECTLY SAFE! I HAVEN'T BEEN HURT YET!
IT'S NOT THAT, IT'S JUST THAT WE DON'T WANT TO DAMAGE THAT EXQUISITE QUEEN ANNE FLUE
THE 18th CENTURY POINTING IS TO DIE FOR!


IT'S GRIM UP THE NORTH POLE
KNIFE & PACKER
NIBBLES FOR SANTA
HOW CAN YOU EAT THAT STUFF?
Dear Santa
GUZZLE
IT'S A LOVING GESTURE FROM AN EXPECTANT CHILD STEEPED IN THE LOVE OF CHRISTMAS
Dear Santa I have left you some milk and bizkits I hope
NEVER MIND THAT... THIS IS FULL FAT MILK, THAT CARROT FOR RUDOLPH IS NOT ORGANIC AND WHAT IS A 'TUNNOCK'S TEA CAKE'???

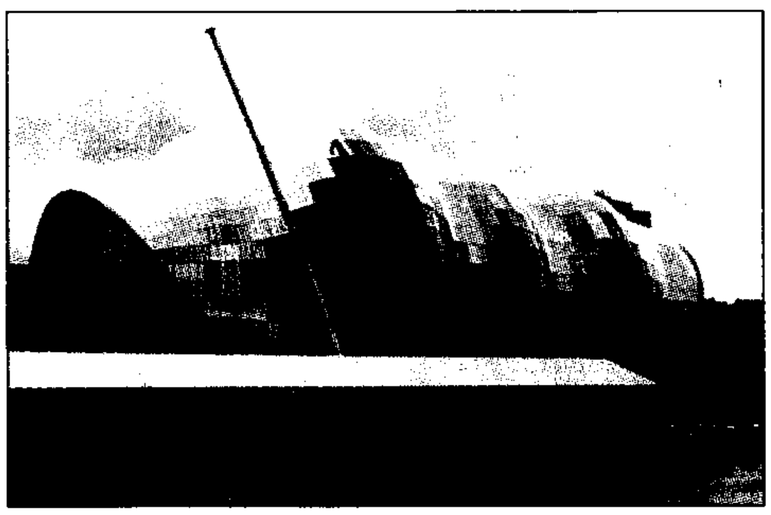
NOOKS and CORNERS



FOR SOME time I thought there was no doubt which building would win Britain's most prestigious architectural prize this year, the Casson Medal. After its tortuous, farcical and scandalous gestation, surely it must be the new Scottish parliament building.

But now I wonder. The fact that the management of its construction was a shambles – provoking an official inquiry – and that it eventually cost more than 10 times the original estimate has no bearing on the quality of its architecture. After all, even at some £500m it is cheaper than Blair's fatuous dome as well as more useful, and compares well with the price of military hardware. Besides, good architecture costs money but can be a worthwhile investment.

Nor does it really matter now that the process of choosing both site and architect was devious and dishonest. Most people in Edinburgh, and probably in Scotland, wanted the old Royal High School on Calton Hill to be the parliament. After all, it had already been converted into a parliamentary chamber (at taxpayers' expense) in anticipation of devolution in 1979, and its Greek Revival style on a magnificent site symbolised the best of Scotland: the Enlightenment, education, culture. But the late Donald Dewar, architect of Scottish devolution, would not have the High School at any price, regarding it as a "nationalist shibboleth" and pressed for the low and inconvenient site at the bottom of the Royal Mile, opposite Holyrood Palace (a disconcerting symbolism).



Then there was the (very) limited competition for the design, steered by the architect Andy MacMillan, who was determined to choose something exotic and who alone probably could understand the strange and complex drawings by the maverick Catalan outsider, Enric Miralles, depicting his "upturned boats" concept.

How much Miralles actually designed before his death in 2000 will be a subject for future historians. The MSPs certainly kept changing their minds and wanting more and more on the site. Who decided on the shape and size of the parliament chamber, so crucial to the functioning of the assembly? Certainly not the elected representatives.

Democracy was never involved and, thanks to a few Westminster politicians and a bunch of civil servants, Scotland has achieved the unique distinction of building a new parliament house before the parliament it was to accommodate had actually come into being to decide what it wanted. What is offensive about the confused and confusing mish-mash of upturned boats and leaf-like forms below Arthur's Seat is not its apparent incoherence, or the pretentiousness of much of its detail, but the self-serving drivel talked about it – that it somehow symbolises modern democracy. It does no such thing, any more than a flat roof represents socialism or a monumental Classical portico indicates totalitarianism. What the Scottish parliament symbolises is the overweening arrogance of the Blair government.

And yet there is a poetry in the completed structure, a sense that its architect had a subtle, intuitive understanding of its site and symbolic purpose, that may mean that – despite its deplorable origins – undeserving Scotland may have a flawed creation of genius in her capital. Miralles was an artist and a civilized man; he could talk knowledgably about Vanbrugh and Robert Adam... which is more than can be said about our own ennobled superstar architects. Which brings me to the actual winner of the Hugh Casson Medal for 2004.

Over the last decade, travellers to Edinburgh by train crossing the Tyne into Newcastle will have noticed a very large metallic structure rising on the south bank of the river. It is the Sage Gateshead, a £70m complex for the performing arts which has just opened. Largely paid for with lottery money, it has been built by Gateshead council as part of its (imaginative and successful) campaign to regenerate a very depressed area and to cock a snook at smug Newcastle on the opposite side of the Tyne.

Gateshead council has built the latest addition to Newcastle's spectacular collection of bridges: the elegant and intriguing Millenium Bridge designed by Wilkinson Eyre architects which was completed two years ago. Unfortunately, for the new music centre, the council did the obvious thing and went to – yawn – Foster & Partners in the vain hope of securing a "masterpiece".

What it has got is a gigantic metal *cliché* which wrecks the scale and drama of the Tyne gorge. The design consists of two auditoria and other facilities enclosed within a giant steel sheath – a curved roof rising from the ground made (arbitrarily) of either glass or stainless-steel panels. The cross section is that lop-sided ellipse profile which is currently so modish, but it is the long elevation that the building presents to the riverside and to Newcastle. The only concession to functionalist theory – to the old-fashioned notion that an exterior should reflect interior arrangements – is that the sheath bulges around the concert halls inside. The result resembles a giant slug or a big shiny condom.

Now it may well be that the auditoria are acoustically excellent. But architecture is, supremely, a public art, and the external effect of the Sage is disastrous. Its form is incoherent and crude. More important, it has no sense of scale. The character of the Tyne gorge used to be of majestic bridges leaping over the river – heroic engineering and landscape combining to create a dramatic picture in which even public buildings were subservient. But now this big, bulbous steel sheath looms over everything – not least the Baltic Centre; its crude, tinselly form screams for attention and diminishes even the great high level bridges. It is claimed the curve of the arch of the Tyne Bridge is echoed by the form of the Sage's roof, but that is empty architect-speak. As architecture, the Sage Gateshead is childish; in urban, townscape terms it is offensive. So well done (yet again) Milord Foster!

'Piloti'

I-SPY *Bristol Airport*

Submitted by Andrew van der Beek. £10 paid for similar submissions. *(SAE required for return of photographs)*

AD NAUSEAM

SAINSBURY'S £9m

Christmas push features its long-term frontman Jamie Oliver returning in what it calls his "quality detective" guise. *Eye* 1115 told how Oliver's previous outing as product policeman, in which he was shown wandering through scenes of bucolic bliss in front of homely-looking pig arks, was not quite the whole picture; and Oliver's latest schtick is equally dubious.

He is pictured in front of a glistening loch, extolling the virtues of Sainsbury's farmed salmon. The advert was filmed, Sainsbury's confirms, at Loch Hourn, where in May 1999 600 tonnes of farmed salmon, or 240,000 individual fish, perished in an overstocking incident. At the time this was believed to be the largest mass mortality of farmed fish in Scottish history. Furthermore, in 2000 Marine Harvest was fined £500 for illegally discharging fish fat and fish oils into Loch Hourn.

In an interview with *The Scotsman*, Oliver said: "It's really hard to gauge the things that have been said about salmon. The chemicals which people worry about are in so many things. I don't think it is worth bothering about too much."

There speaks the ever-watchful quality detective.

EYEBROWS were raised all round at the sight of Gwyneth Paltrow appearing in a new Martini ad. Not because the Hollywood actress stopped the ad from being shown in her native US or in the UK lest it sully her artistic aura; not because it shows her in a risqué pose, sporting just a pair of knickers; but because Paltrow, reportedly paid £3m for a series of spots, is famously teetotal.

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH

God, what a year! The Great BritArt Fire, Conceptualism under attack, Saatchi and Serota slagging one another off...
Let's hope the next one's just as good, publicity-wise!
To 2005!

Letters

Cover story

Sir,

I herewith return, unread, the current issue of your magazine. To say I find the cover gratuitously offensive is an understatement. One presumes you are trying to establish your street cred with what passes for a liberal intelligentsia in this benighted country. Whatever. I now cancel my subscription.

Yours sincerely,
PETER A. WHELAN,
Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.

Sir,

Your latest cover is tasteless, feeble and unfunny. It makes no satirical point. Worse, it is cowardly. Mock religion all you like. The more it is mocked the better. But not selectively. You mock Christianity because you know that Christians will not retaliate with fatwahs. You witless, gutless buggers wouldn't dare mock Islam.

Yours with contempt,
S. GREEN,
Via email.

Sir,

While I appreciate the intent behind the Christmas Special cover, I feel I must write to appeal to you not to use this type of picture again. To use a picture of the birth of the Son of God is inappropriate and blasphemous. I feel that to get a laugh you've cheapened your good selves.

This curious habit of older men with young women, and getting into trouble, seems to never go out of fashion. Would you by chance have a picture of a similar couple from some time ago?

Merry Christmas,
JONATHAN STEWART,
Bolsover, Derbyshire.

Sir,

So you've come up with a Christmas cover which manages to be both in very poor taste and not even remotely funny. How strange that you also seemed to have shied away from satirising Ramadan last month – oh, I forgot, that would take something called "courage" rather than choosing the same old soft targets. May I suggest a photo of Theo Van Gogh's body with a copy of Private Eye skewered to his chest with some undoubtedly witty comment in the attached speech bubble.

Yours,
PAUL MCNAMARA,
Via email.

Sir,

Your December cover is unfunny and in appalling bad taste. You don't deserve a Happy Christmas.

THE DODD FAMILY,
Via email.

Sir,

As a devoted Eye reader for many years, I nevertheless deprecate the almost invariably offensive, not to say blasphemous, cover of the Christmas issue.

The current offering leaves the Madame Tussauds tableau looking positively reverent.

In the past, I sometimes left the magazine on the shelf because of a similarly offending cover, but now, as a subscriber, I have it posted through my letterbox.

I shan't cancel my subscription, but in future could you insult whichever politician freely, but leave the Nativity scene out of it?

Yours faithfully,
CHRISTOPHER LENNON,
Via email.

Colemanballs-up

Sir,

I love Colemanballs, but it is ruined when an incorrect contribution is printed.

I refer to "One word to describe it would be absolutely pathetic – Alan Hansen BBC1" (Eye 1120).

Hansen realized immediately what he was saying and finished the sentence with "...OK, I know that's two words!" amid general hilarity from Gary Lineker et al in the Match of the Day studio.

The contributor either misheard or chose to ignore Hansen's correction. Either way, the entry is invalid. Didn't the editor see Match of the Day that night?!

Best wishes,
LEON TRUSCOTT,
Torpoint, Cornwall.

Retch for the Sky

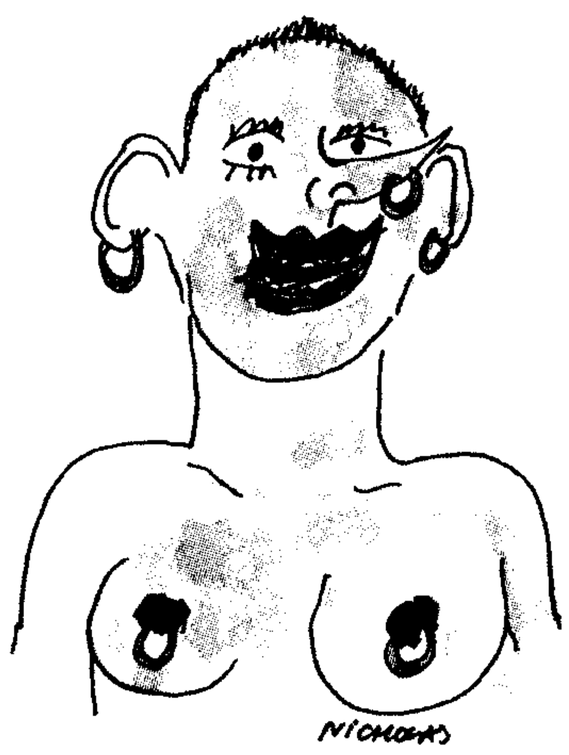
Sir,

Regarding Eye's use of a Sky advert (Eye 1120) and the comments on it (Eye 1121). I was initially puzzled myself, before realising the true irony of this situation: Private Eye is now making fun of Sky and being paid, by Sky, to do it.

I consider that a victory.

Yours,
JOHN SHIMMIN,
Grey College, University of Durham.

"Enough bonding – to work!"



"On the fifth day of Christmas..."

Scenes You Seldom See

"Thanks, but I have all the toys I want. Why not give my present to someone more needy?"

Talking point

Sir,

I am sure your readers were amused by your item about the General Teaching Council's booklet concerning "learning conversations". As a teacher I was fascinated by the idea that 97 percent of teachers had "learning conversations" – meaning that they actually talk about their work while they are at school. I am sure that even the most perceptive teachers were amazed by this extraordinary and novel observation!

Like you, we often wonder exactly what the General Teaching Council does. Its most recent report showed that over 25 percent of its considerable income is used to manage subscriptions and arrears.

Presumably this will increase should the day ever come when the government bites the bullet and stops making a special payment of £30 to teachers in order that they can use this to pay their subscriptions and teachers have to pay their own membership fee to this self-serving and useless body.

ALEX WOOD,
Roade, Northampton.

Picture opportunity

Sir,

While leafing through "Celebrity" a collection of photographs by Terry O'Neill, I stumbled across a picture of Andrew Neil in unusual attire. Moreover, he was in the arms of an attractive young lady.

Keep up the good work,
MARTIN McCLUSKEY,
Via email.

● I have no intention of putting in this photograph for no reason. Ed.

Lookalike

MEP

Child Catcher

Sir,

It appears Mr Mandelson's new position was even more sinister than previously thought – what do they get up to in Brussels? Or perhaps he is trying to secure the King of Vulgaria a British passport?

Yours, in fear,
J. MATHIESON,

Via email.

Hutton whitewash

Sir,

I wish to cancel my subscription for Private Eye as soon as the current annual direct debit has run out. I believe that will be April next year or thereabouts.

My reason is that Private Eye coverage of the Iraq war simply slavishly followed the herd. The rubbishing of Hutton, etc, without any serious textual or factual or remotely logical analysis was a good example of the trivialisation of news on Iraq into 'surely there must be something wrong'.

Not if you can't find any evidence, there isn't. I am cancelling the direct debit at the bank.

CLIVE HILL,

Via email.

David Penhaligon

Sir,

I have perused your organ for many years, but the mention of the late David Penhaligon MP has for the first time moved me to write.

Mr Penhaligon (not Penhaligan!) was Liberal MP for Truro and did indeed die in a car crash, in December 1986. That crash had nothing to do with the remoteness of his constituency from London though: his car hit a patch of black ice very early one morning while he was on his way to an annual engagement – visiting the postal workers in his constituency as they coped with the Christmas mail.

I hope you can find space to publish this correction.

Yours etc,
RICHARD ARMSTRONG,

Midsomer Norton, Somerset.

Santa-monious

Sir,

Having been a loyal reader for over 18 months, and having never found anything even remotely offensive about your magnificent organ, I must protest about the al Qaeda cartoon in 1121.

It is generally accepted that I have something of an "alternative" sense of humour, but even I fail to see the funny side of this rather sick cartoon. I am so incensed that I am considering cancelling my subscription etc.

Yours in a state of righteous indignation,
A. MUNRO,

Via email.

"While shepherds watched their flocks..."

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

"He's always been an excellent dribbler, both with and without the ball."

TalkSport
(N.D. Ogilvie)

"Fulham needed those three points because they were slowly sinking towards the bottom very very quickly."

MARK LAWRENSON, BBC1
(Ian Hankinson)

"They've [Rosenberg] had a holocaust of a start..."

TERRY VENABLES, ITV
(Nick Thompson)

"Yes, the lance has been boiled."

Sky News
(Sylvia Crookes)

"He's got a great right foot, and if he can get his head around that he'll be a great player."

RAY WILKINS, Sky Sports
(Danny McConnell)

LUVVIES

"On the first day of shooting, after a couple of weeks of rehearsing, Natalie (Portman) brought Julia (Roberts) a little silver necklace with a word spelled out in the middle. The word was c**t. Julia was enchanted and loved it and said it was the sweetest present she'd ever had. Then, on the last day of shooting, she had a present for Natalie and it was a silver necklace and it spelled out L'il C**t. That's how free they are and what good friends they were."

MIKE NICHOLS
Evening Standard

Submitted by Matthew Phillips.

An occasional column devoted to gems from the acting profession. £10 paid for entries.

On the right track

Sir,

It would seem that after several years even the privatised rail companies have noticed that the current "organisation" of our railways is inefficient.

As First Great Western note in the leaflet introducing the new timetable: "For several years it has been apparent that if all rail services to London Paddington are in the hands of one operator it is possible to run additional trains, deliver improved reliability and, in some cases, offer shorter journey times." If it works for one line think what it would do if the whole network were run by one operator. We could call it... er... British Rail!

Yours hopefully,
ROGER SAXON,

Clyst St Mary, Exeter.

Passive resistance

Sir,

I am sure that I will not be the first or the last pedant to point out that the passive ("Street of Shame", Eye 1121, 10-23 Dec) is a voice and not a tense.

My non-existent subscription will be cancelled forthwith. (That's a passive voice in the future tense. Er, I think).

Keep shaking the tabloids,

Yours sincerely,
MIKE ELLWOOD,

Abingdon, Oxford.

HOM SAP

AUSTIN

FESTIVE SOLUTIONS

"Smart Christmas Solutions" – *decorations*

"Smart Gift Solutions" – *presents*

"Christmas Ornament Storage Solutions cleverly designed so that you no longer have to painstakingly wrap each Christmas ornament in tissue paper in order to protect it" – *cardboard boxes*

"UK Corporate Solutions: The ideal solution for your Christmas, New Year of Office party" – *venue hire*

All submitted by readers

Letter from **Amsterdam**
from Our Own Correspondent

GREETINGS from Beirut on the North Sea, as we now call home. It was the Muslims, of course, who got Theo van Gogh, the poisonous columnist who found controversy with his anti-Islamist film *Submission*. But the ripples of his murder last month are already spreading across our ever more shaky political system.

Van Gogh was an ardent admirer of flamboyantly gay, anti-Muslim politician Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated exactly 911 days earlier. Like Fortuyn, Van Gogh had no patience with our "polder-model" of government.

There was a time when the international community looked on with envy at a system built on consensus between employers, unions and government that coupled social harmony with sturdy economic growth. But our economy has stopped doing so well and the polder model has become synonymous with ducking responsibility, evading decisions and back-room politicking.

Days after the murder of Van Gogh, our finance minister Gerrit Zalm declared "war" on terror. This is unfortunate, as we haven't won a war in centuries. Like everything else in our country, political structures dealing with security are thoroughly "polderised". On the local level, security is dealt with by a so-called "triangle" of chief of police, mayor and public prosecutor. On the national level, responsibilities are similarly dispersed between the justice and interior ministries. The Machiavellian Christian Democrat (CDA) justice minister Piet Hein Donner is now "coordinating minister for countering terror". He wrested this responsibility from the nice but bumbling minister of the interior Johan Remkes in the summer.

The first row on security broke out only days after the 2 November murder. Apparently our version of MI5, the AIVD, had been spying on extremist safe houses in Amsterdam all along. Mayor of Amsterdam Job Cohen was furious at the ministries of the interior and justice for not being informed. These, in turn, claimed the AIVD *had* informed the Amsterdam council of its operations. The information had somehow been lost in the Amsterdam local "triangle".

It also appeared that the AIVD had had the Van Gogh murder suspect, Mohammed Bouyeri, in its sights but decided he was not dangerous enough to include in the 150 or so extremists under surveillance. It appeared Bouyeri had been detained by police only weeks earlier for dodging fares on the tram and resisting arrest. A worse disclosure was that of the Moroccan interpreter at the AIVD who had leaked sensitive information to terror suspects linked to Bouyeri. Remkes was savaged in parliament by his own party, the VVD. He only survived the debate thanks to Donner's more convincing performance.

One more debate like that could cost Remkes' head and might cause the cabinet to fall. This is teetering anyway. Van Gogh's vulgar style ran counter to our prime minister Balkenende's quest for "norms and values". Combining Christian Democrat *back to basics* with a gesture to the Islamic community, Donner promised to resurrect an ancient article in the constitution against blasphemy.

This caused outrage among those who considered Van Gogh a martyr of the free word. Coalition partners VVD and left liberals D66 rubbished the proposal. Donner was forced to eat his words. The Christian Democrats were furious at D66 for going a step further and actually tabling a motion to abolish the offending article on blasphemy. Tensions still linger, even though the motion was defeated.

A government collapse now means new elections, which would especially benefit Geert "Mozart" Wilders, an anti-Islamist formerly VVD MP with a stranger haircut even than Boris Johnson. Wilders split off after being forbidden to vote against Turkish EU accession. According to polls, the now one-man Group Wilders threatens to emulate Fortuyn and gain a significant representation in parliament. Cynics, meanwhile, wonder for whom his namesake's *Requiem* will be played next.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

"The husband was aware that his wife sometimes walked in her sleep," Dr Peter Buchanan told the annual scientific meeting of the Australasian Sleep Association in Sydney, "and had sometimes awoken to find her absent from the bedroom. He had also discovered some puzzling circumstantial evidence, including the unexplained presence of condoms around the house. So one night he followed her when she went sleepwalking, and found to his horror that she was leaving the house to walk the streets and engage in random acts of sex with total strangers."

Giving further details of this unusual case, Dr Buchanan admitted that "incredulity is the first staging post for anyone involved in this, including medics. And one has to maintain a healthy degree of scepticism. But this was a respectable middle-aged woman, who clearly wasn't using sleepwalking as an ingenious excuse for clandestine sexual relations. She was baffled, and her partner was distraught. Of course, she may have been unconsciously acting out some hidden agenda, but brain tests taken while she was sleeping indicated that she usually awoke from deep sleep without first passing through lighter sleep patterns, and that's a phenomenon closely linked to sleepwalking.

"I treated her successfully with psychotherapy, and diagnosed her condition as a form of parasomnia, known as 'sleep sex'. This sleep disorder is increasingly being recognised as a real and personally devastating condition, and may be much more common than is generally realised, because sufferers are usually too embarrassed to seek help. I expect 'sleep sex' to be included in the next revision of the International Classification of Sleep Disorders, which will give it the final stamp of legitimacy." *(The Age [Australia], 14/10/04. Spotter: Brendan Joseph O'Byrne)*

– o –

"It sounds just like a high-pitched raspberry," Ben Wilson of the University of British Columbia told a convention of aquatic scientists in Vancouver, "and is caused by bubbles coming out of a herring's anus. For decades, we've wondered how shoals of fish keep together by night, and now we think we know. They emit a Fast Repetitive Tick, similar to a human fart, which enables them to locate each other after dark.

"We think the farts are used for communication, because the herrings only emit them at night. And they're very high-pitched, so other herrings can hear them, but most predators cannot. We don't think the farts are caused by digestive gases, because the number of sounds doesn't change when the fish are fed. More probably, they're caused by air escaping from the swim bladder through the anus. This is still just a theory at present, but the discovery should be useful to fishermen, who might be able to locate shoals of herring by tracking their FRTs."

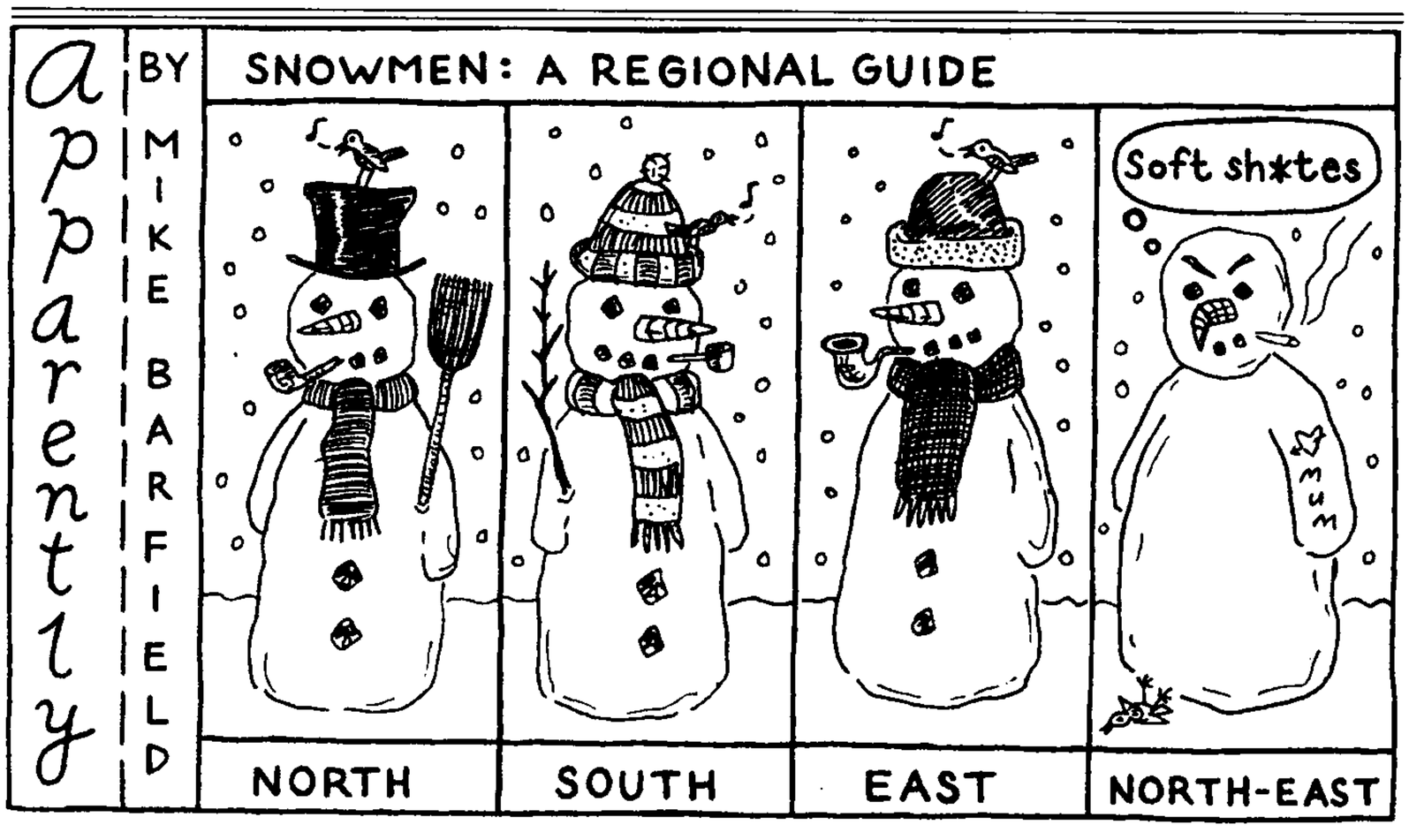
Commenting on the paper, Dennis Higgs of the University of Windsor in Ontario called it "surprising and interesting. I'd not have thought of it, but fish do very strange and diverse things." (New Scientist, 5/11/03. Spotter: Peter Owen)

– o –

"These modern mannequins in shop windows look much too real, and we want them banned," Chairman Majeed Karimi of Muharraq Municipal Council told reporters in Bahrain. "They look like real-life women, with exactly the same features, including shameful parts, and when they are scantily clad in lingerie, they excite our young men. I have received various complaints from people who say that they feel aroused by seeing these mannequins being exhibited in front of them, and complain about

crowds of young men who stand in front of the windows of lingerie shops, fantasising about the mannequins. This is against our social values. We want them banned.

"We don't mind covered-up mannequins, or those wearing suits, or those used to exhibit sports or children's wear. Our problem is just with mannequins wearing lingerie. I have remonstrated with shop owners, but they say that if they didn't exhibit mannequins, women wouldn't be attracted to their shop, and wouldn't know about their new products. But we are already facing a tough time fighting pornography through mobile phones, the Internet, magazines, and video, without this further temptation on our streets." *(Gulf Daily News [Bahrain], 19/11/04. Sotter: Saleh Nass)*



ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon), PFI, GM, WMD, CND

An open letter to Mr Blunkett, formerly Head of the Neighbourhood Watch

Dear David,

It is with deep regret that I have to accept your resignation from the PCC after we sat in the vicarage and talked over the whole unfortunate affair, friend to friend, parson to parishioner, man to man about to be sacked.

I don't think you'll mind me telling the parish, David, that it was an emotional moment when you gave me a big hug and, for some reason, called me "Mrs Quinn".

But, hey, let's get one thing clear. You have done nothing wrong and you leave with your integrity intact. Which may leave some people wondering "Why did he have to go then?". And I suppose the logical extension to that conundrum is that if you *had* done something wrong, you would have *kept* your job!

It doesn't seem to make sense, but, hey, I'm just a parish vicar, and these are deep mysteries that have baffled greater minds than mine for thousands of years!

For example, St Thomas of Uttley made no mention of you, David, in his great work *De Legova Mysteriosa* and if he couldn't solve this one, then no one can!

So, let's leave it at that, shall we?

What we know, David, is that, sadly, you have had to go, but the church's message is surely one of forgiveness. I have forgiven you, David, even though you have done nothing wrong, which is why you lost your job. And I'm sure there will come a time when we will all look deep into our hearts, and say, "The vicar was right – as usual. We must all forgive you".

David, you are innocent of all charges, except the ones where you aren't, but, hey, don't we all make honest mistakes and there is no one more honest than you, David – except me, obviously, which is why I'm

admitting honestly that you did nothing wrong.

And since we all believe in the possibility of life after death, doesn't this mean, when translated into modern everyday language, that you, David, should get your job back sometime in the New Year?

So can I conclude by wishing you, Lazarus, I mean David, a very, very Happy Christmas and best wishes to your family whoever and wherever they are.

Your good friend, Tony

Parish Postbag

Dear Sir,

On behalf of the Women's Institute and the Unmarried Mothers' Union, we would like to protest in the strongest possible terms at the conduct of the vicar's new curate, Mr Milburn. Since his appointment he has shown himself to be totally arrogant, insensitive and an interfering bully. This kind of behaviour is deplorable and should be left to those of us who

Yours faithfully,
MRS JOWELL, MRS BECKETT, MRS HODGE, MRS HEWITT, etc

The Editor reserves the right to cut all letters which are disrespectful of Mr Milburn, who has made a great sacrifice in resigning from his family to spend more time with the vicar. D.H.

NATIVITY PLAY

Mrs Jowell writes: I regret to announce that we cannot afford to stage the nativity play this year since we need the so-called "Theatre Budget" to pay for the new slot machines in the South Transept and the roulette wheel in the crypt. I am sure all parishioners will agree that this is a very wise investment and is what the church is *all* about!

The same applies to the craft fair, the art show and the various other "cultural" (!) activities which have had to be sacrificed in favour of the Church Gambling Project. But, I am sure we all agree, they will not be missed since, they belong to another, elitist and frankly bygone era. Mrs T.J.

To Remember In Your Prayers

● Mr Butler, who worked loyally behind the scenes at the vicarage for many years, serving many incumbents, including our present vicar, about whom he wrote a very nice report, clearing him of any wrongdoing in his relationship with the Rev. Dubya. But now, in his retirement he has, alas, fallen pray to loneliness and bitterness, feeling that the world has moved on and that he is no longer at the centre of things. Let us pray that he is granted a speedy release from his infirmities and delusions, and that before he again succumbs to the temptations of self-publicising interviews about how I decide everything sitting on the vicarage sofa with my cronies (which I am perfectly entitled to do, incidentally), he may be guided to seek an early release from his misery in the Dame Mary Warnock Hospice. T.B.

The vicar shows off his proposed design for a new stained glass window (with no stains, of course!) commemorating the life and work of his friend St David of Blunkett, who was martyred by so-called colleagues who put him "in the press" until he cracked, so jealous were they of his sanctity, holiness and innocence. Thanks to local artist Mr de la Nougerede for this charming drawing.

Yuletide Fun!

Provided by members of the PCC.

Q: Why is Mr Blunkett like a turkey?
A: Because he got stuffed at Christmas!
from Mr Prescott)

Q: Why is Mr Blunkett like a high-speed train?
A: Because he went on the 'fast-track' and hit the buffers! (from Mrs Beckett)

Q: Which member of the PCC likes to pull a cracker?
A: Mr Blunkett (geddit?)!(from Mr Straw)

The Vicar writes: These jokes are, I'm afraid, totally out of order. We all like a bit of harmless fun at Christmas time, but this is not in any way amusing. T.B.

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

Here is the unabridged text of the sermon our vicar will be preaching on December 25 in the St Albion's Worship Centre.

Hullo!

First of all, Cherie and I would like to extend our season's greetings to everyone here this morning, and indeed everyone in the parish, regardless of their race, colour, creed or sexual orientation!

A Very Happy Holiday to you all! Unless of course you are one of those people who prefers to be unhappy, which is, of course, your perfect right and an entirely valid lifestyle option!

Or maybe you don't believe in holidays, which again you are perfectly entitled to do – like my nextdoor neighbour, who is not only unhappy all the time, but never stops working at his figures!

Of course, Gordon is free to choose to work all the hours that God sends (sorry, when I say 'God', of course I mean Allah, the Supreme Being, the Chief Jedi, or whatever belief-system you feel comfortable with at this time of year!).

Good for Gordon , I say! But, let's be honest. All that hard work hasn't exactly made the parish accounts look very healthy, has it?

Still, love your neighbour, that is my motto! And if your neighbour is hard to love, then that's so much more of a challenge, isn't it?

But, hey, aren't we forgetting the real message of Christmas/Eid/Hanukkah/ Diwali/Winterval/the Notting Hill Festival?

And what is that message, I hear you ask, Rashid?

Peace on earth, goodwill to men! Isn't that what people used to say in the old days?

Nowadays, of course, we put it rather better, by saying peace on earth (except in certain trouble spots where war is the only option); and goodwill to all persons (which makes clear that we are including women, members of the gay and lesbian communities, and, of course, all those persons of trans-gender status).

But, look, isn't there something a little bit wrong with such a sweeping generalisation?

I am sure when we talk about "goodwill to all persons", we aren't meant to take that as meaning literally *all* persons, are we?

I mean, there are obviously certain categories of persons whom it would be quite wrong for us to feel goodwill towards!

Can any of the children guess who I am thinking of here?

Yes, Ranjit, 'terrorists' – that's a good answer! But it's not quite the one I was thinking of!

What I had in mind was someone beginning with 'B'!

No, Justin, not Mr Blunkett. That's not funny or clever. You can see Mrs Hodge afterwards. And, yes, I thought that would scare you!

No, Justin, come out of the cupboard! I know your father's a lawyer. Just my little joke.

Anyway, we're rather in danger of losing the point of this Yuletide message, aren't we?

The word I was looking for, of course, was 'burglars'!

When we're thinking about all those people in the world who don't deserve any goodwill, then top of the list must surely be 'B-U-R-G-L-A-R-S'.

Everyone hates burglars, don't they? And I'd like to make it very clear that I am second to no one in my hatred of burglars!

I know our local solicitor Mr Howard has been going round the parish saying that hating them was *his* idea!

But it wasn't anything to do with him! It was me who pointed out that burglars were becoming a real menace in our society today, and that they should all be shot!

Of course, I don't mean that literally, since guns have very rightly been banned!

But what I *do* mean is that if, for example, you knew that a certain person was determined, come what may, to enter your house, sit at your desk, raid your fridge and make free with your toilet, wouldn't you be entitled to take any measures to stop such a person doing such a thing?

Particularly if you had repeatedly warned this person to keep out of your house and to stop trying to steal your job!

So my message this Christmas is "Gordon, stay on your own side of the wall!". As it says in the Good Book, "This *is* a gun in my pocket, and I'm not pleased to see you" *(The Meditations of Saint Mae of the West).*

So, thank you all for coming, and I hope when you return home you will richly enjoy your traditional Midwinter Festival meal.

At the vicarage, we'll be having turkey! But if you're having gefilte fish, samosas, nut cutlets or a good old burger and fries, the message of the angels is the same – enjoy!

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HOON ANNOUNCES NEW-LOOK SCOTTISH ARMY

by Our Lack of Defence Staff **M.O.D. Cuts**

IN A shock announcement last night Geoffrey Hoon unveiled his plans for an amalgamation of all the Scottish regiments into "a slimmed-down agile fighting elite" to be renamed "The King's Own Black Watch Argyll and Highlander Royal Scots Fusiliers" – or "Hamish" for short.

Fighting Farce

The new regiment will have:

- **One tartan**
- **One cap badge**
- **One rifle**
- **One soldier ("Hamish")**

Said Mr Hoon: "I am confident that this is the way forward in a world fraught with the threat of terrorism where ground troops are more and more vital for the security of the nation."

GLENDA SLAGG

THE GIRL IN THE SACK!

■ **DIDN'T your heart go out to poor Davy Blunkett as he opened his soul to the nation and told us how much he loved his little lad!!?!? I'm a hard-bitten hackette, but let me tell you, mister, even I shed a tear – no, what am I saying, I wept buckets as this dear, sweet daddy poured out his troubles on the telly??!? David, we didn't deserve you!!!?! Boo hoo hoo!!!**

■ DAVID BLUNKETT!!?! Didn't he make you sick??!?? Taking out the onion and turning on the waterworks!?!? Come off it, you bearded baby, the only person *you* were crying for was yourself!!??! I'm a soft-centred, sentimental gal, but let me tell you, mister, even I had a lump in my throat – no, what am I saying??!??! I vomited buckets at the sight of you trying to spin your tawdry tale on the telly!!????!

David, you deserved what you got!??! And then some!!! Urgh?!? Urgh!!!?

■ *AND HERE is the Ten O'Clock News!!??! Bonk!!! Sir Trevor MacDonald's Marriage In Crisis!!?! Bonk!!! Trevor Having Trial Separation!!??! Bonk!!?! Trevor Being Comforted By Younger Woman!!??!* (You're fired. Ed.)

■ HERE they are – Glenda's Yuletime Yummies:

● Father Christmas – OK, so he's old and bearded!?! It didn't stop Kimberly Fortier!!?! Geddit???!?

● Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer – OK, so you've got a shiny nose!??! What else you got, Rudy??!??

● The Snowman – I'll warm you up, big boy, and you'll melt in my arms!!!?!? *(You really are fired. Ed.)*

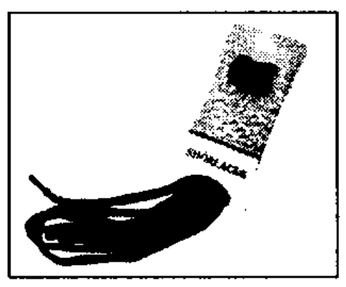
Byeeee!!!

10 OF THE BEST
No. 94 Shoelaces

CHRISTMAS GIFT IDEAS

1 For those on a modest budget, the BHS "Lace Master" is reliable, attractive and good value for money.

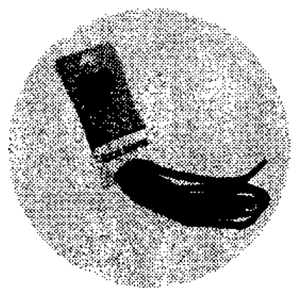
£6.75



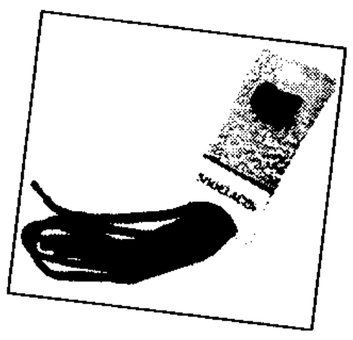
2 For those looking for a hard-wearing utility lace, the "Bangalore" from India represents excellent value at **75p** for six pairs.

3 For the luxury lace user, the top-of-the-range designer laces from the Milan House of Prodi are hand-made from Chinese silk. A must-have for the international "shoelace set" but won't last long in your average trainers!

£799 per lace



4 A new entrant into the highly competitive shoelace market is Tesco's own brand "Just Laces" which are proving a big hit for the mid-range buyer. "We've sold over 9 million laces in the last month alone" said Tesco's chief lace buyer.

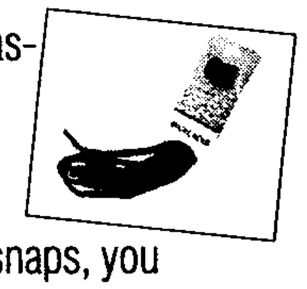


£5.50 (Buy two laces, get one free)

5 For the truly discriminating lace-o-phile, Wheen's of Jermyn Street can provide a bespoke lace to suit your individual needs. Fittings by Abdul (great-grandson of the founder, Abdul Wheen) take less than an hour. Famous customers include the late Peter Ustinov, Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, Bryan Ferry and TV's Charles Moore

Prices from £2,500

6 For the "Man-who-has-everything", the Dave Cash Novelty Emporium is advertising the world's first edible shoelace! When one snaps, you simply eat it!



25p per dozen (Flavours: liquorice)

7 That's enough shoelaces. Ed.

Compiled by Tamsin de Botton, Georgina Mount, Henrietta Johnson, Samantha Moore, Tabitha Kellner and Tintinabula Rees-Mogg. Additional research by Ambrosia Evans-Pritchard, Barbarella D'Ancona, Salmonella Lawson and Peregrina Worsthorne.

TV CHOICE
CHRISTMAS FILMS

Christmas Eve Day
ITV, 2.30pm (not Scotland)
'They Flew To Bruges' (2001, colour, 122 minutes)

Animated Disney/Pixar remake of the much-loved wartime classic, using incredible CGT effects to create 1940's Bruges under German occupation. With the voices of Tom Hanks (Capt. 'Chalkie' Chalkington), Eddie Murphy (Gunner Tom 'Gun' Gunnerson), Alan Rickman (Field Marshal Goering) and Linda Evangelista (Nurse Marie de Genevieve).

Eye Rating: Unmissable

Christmas Day Eve
BBC2, 10.30am (not Wales)
'Bridge Over The River Kwai' (2003, colour, 238 minutes)

Hollywood remake of classic wartime drama, imaginatively recast with Wesley Snipes in the old Alec Guinness role and Ralph Fiennes as the Japanese commandant. In this version, American POWs refuse to build a bridge across the river and instead escape on motorbikes and invade Tokyo, thus bringing the war to an end. Don't miss Julia Roberts as Montgomery of Alamein.

Eye Rating: Stunning

Christmas Holiday Monday
BBC1, 9pm
'Dr Zhivago' (2004, colour, 132 minutes)

Remake of the classic 2003 remake of David Lean's 1965 classic. Leonardo di Caprio plays the romantic hero who sweeps off her feet the beautiful Lara (introducing Kelly Holmes in her first cinematic role), as the Berlin Wall crumbles. Lush romantic score by Eminem. Watch for cameo by Stephen Fry as the ageing Count Leo Tolstoy.

Eye Rating: Revolutionary!!!

Eve of New Year's Eve
C4, 10.30pm
'Bambi' (2003, colour, 200 minutes)

Perfect holiday viewing for all the family, with this real-action remake of the 1943 Disney classic. The computer-enhanced talking deer will touch every heart. Hugh Grant is the voice of Bambi, with Miriam Margolis as Bambi's mother and Al Pacino as the loveable Thumper. New score by Elton John, including mega-hit 'Bambi In the Wind'.

Eye Rating: Wonderful weepy

New Year's Day
ITV, 1.45pm
'A Chump At Oxford' (2004, b&w, 367 minutes)

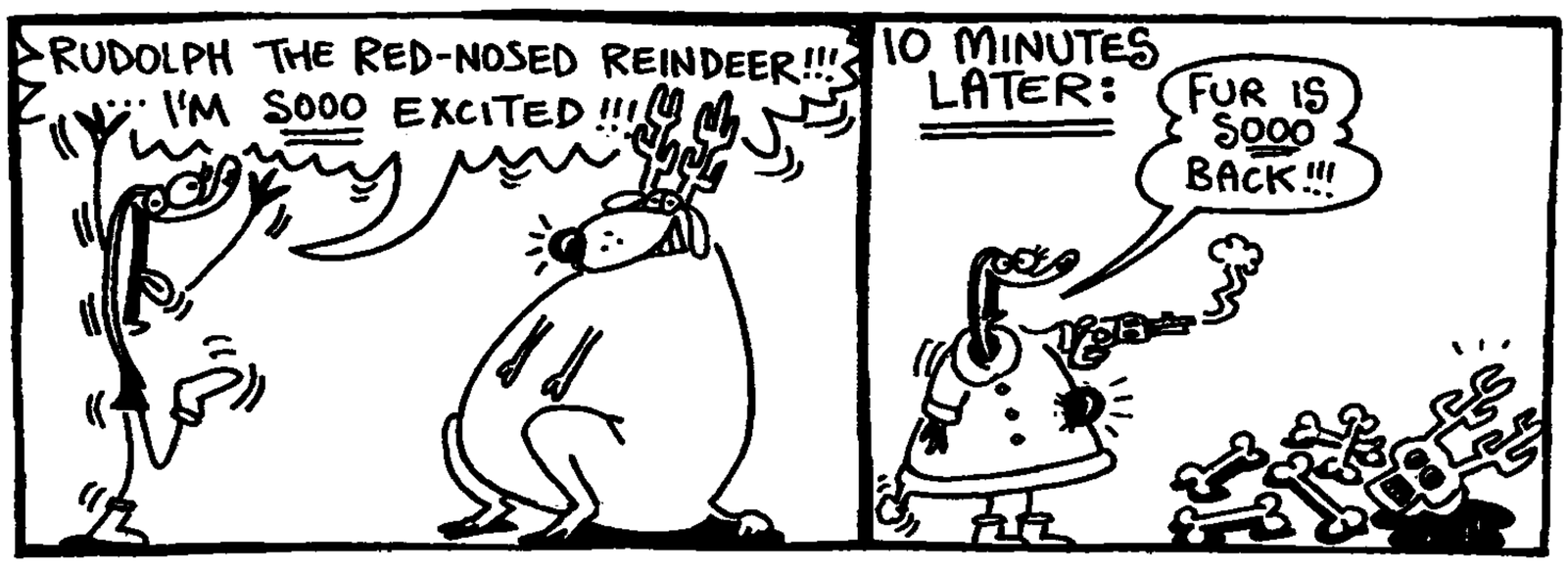
Remake of 1935 Laurel and Hardy classic, hilariously featuring the elderly Judge Popplewell (played by Norman Wisdom in his final screen role ever) who shocks his family by deciding to become an Oxford student at the age of 86. Trouble starts when he can't keep his hands off the nubile young law students (Jordan and Melinda Messenger). Unforgettable cameo by Stephen Fry as Mr Trout, the college porter.

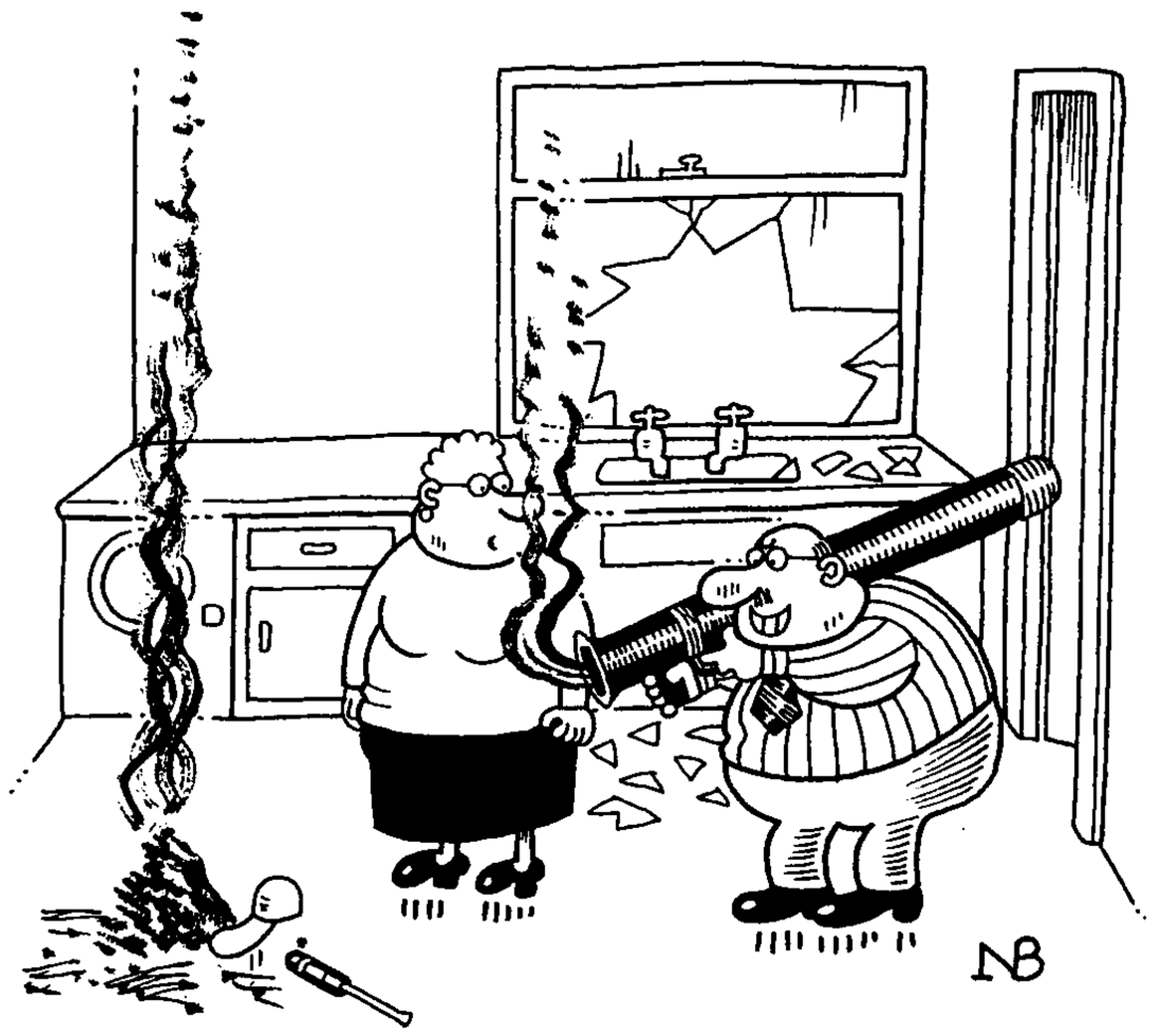
Eye Rating: Hysterical

(That's enough rotten films. Ed.)

SUPERMODELS

KERBER





"I wouldn't call that 'reasonable force'"

NEW FROM

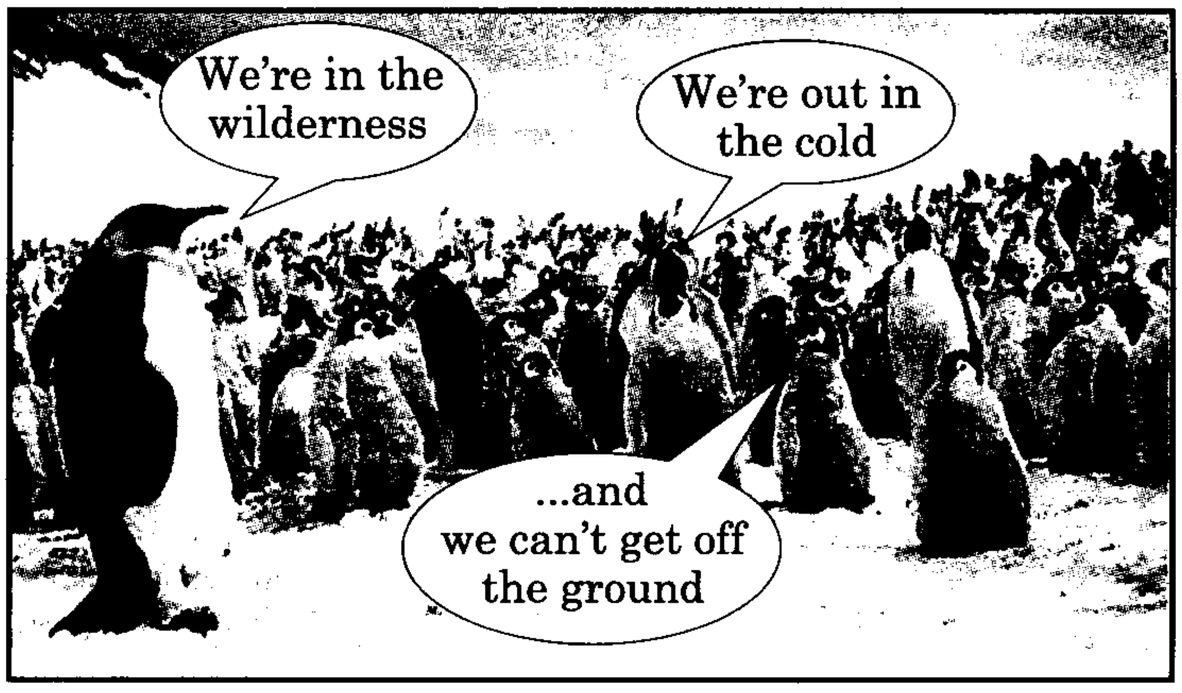
Gnoman's

Yule look great and feel comfortable in our latest range of casual Christmas gear!!!

Model **Tony** is wearing a classic matelot-style blouson from Maison Mandy in Bruxelles. Hand-woven from luxurious alpaca wool, and coloured with organic GM-free vegetable dyes, coupled with Texas-style *"Buttkicker"* jeans from the Dubya range. Tony's hair has been created by Hairbrush of Mayfair. Tony's makeup is by Airbrush of Downing Street.

Prices: blouson £399.99; jeans £250.00. *(Inflatable adoring wife extra.)*

HAPPY CHRISTMAS FROM MICHAEL HOWARD



RADIO HIGHLIGHTS

OPERA ON THREE
90.2 – 92.4FM

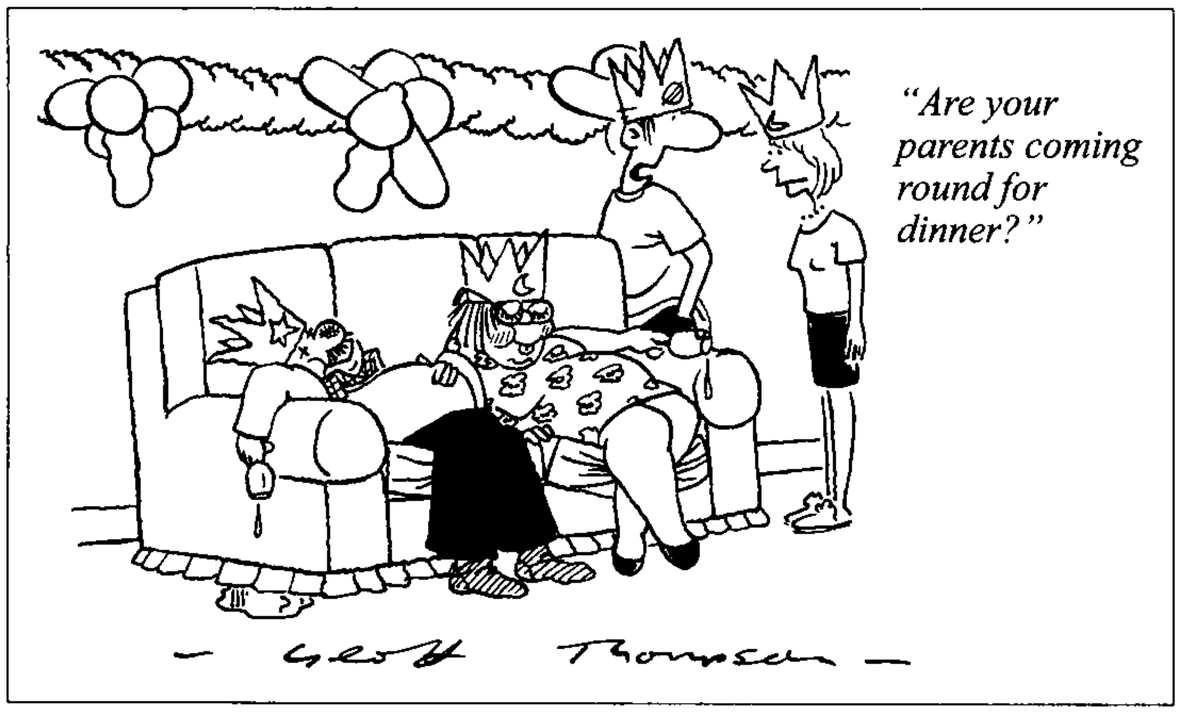
Berlusconi Innocenti
by Giovanni Paparazzi. Performed by the Sicilian Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Alessandro Capone.

Act One
The robber-baron Count Berlusconi has at last been taken into custody after years of brigandage. Wearing his trade-mark gypsy bandana, he sings the aria *Che sono tutti Communisti bastardi*, in which he cries to heaven that he has been framed by his left-wing opponents.

Act Two
The chorus of magistrates are unimpressed by the brigandleader's plea, and sing the famous "Monopoly", chorus *Va alla prisone, ne passagero go, ne collecta due cento libra*. For our hero, all looks black (Conrad).

Act Three
In a miraculous reversal of fortune, Berlusconi is found innocent of all charges. The magistrates have discovered some important new evidence concealed in brown envelopes. They sing *Siamo Millionaire, grazie a Silvio!* Freed at last from the shadow that has hung over his life for many years, he returns in triumph to his old carefree life, robbing the poor to give to the rich (himself).

"They pump so much water into them these days"



ROYAL ROMANCE SPECIAL

SHOULD HARRY WED CAMILLA?

Phil Spaceover-Christmas by Our Royal Staff

HE's the most eligible young man in Britain today. Third in line to the throne and with a reputation as a ladies' man.

She's the blonde bombshell who has swept him off his feet.

Friends say the Prince is head over heels in love and now the only question is when will the happy couple name the day?

Some say it will be this Christmas, but those in the know put their money on June 2094 as the big day. *(You're fired. Ed.)*

How They Are Related

Totty
|
Rumpy
|
Pumpy
|
Blondy
|
Cuty
|
Tooty
|
Fruity
|
Chelsy

Harold Hadrada
|
Harold Hadlaga
|
Harold Hadhangova
|
Harold Godwinson
|
Harold Godlneedadrink
|
King Harry
|
Kingsize Rizla Harry
|
Prince Harry

News in Brief

N. IRELAND PEACE TALKS DUE TO RESTART THEN FALTER THEN RESUME AGAIN

SINN FEIN and the Democratic Unionist Party are due to resume peace talks, which will subsequently come to a grinding halt, before recommencing again, only for the whole process to collapse once more.

Latest

Talks called off as Adams says Potato and Paisley says Potarto.

BBC REPEATS SLAMMED

THE BBC was slammed today after the Director General promised less repeats, streamlined production budgets and more quality programmes on BBC1 and 2.

"Every time there's a charter renewal, these pledges get repeated over and over again. Can't they just pledge something different for a change? We're tired of these reheated leftovers.

"Didn't we hear exactly the same thing last *(cont. p. 94)*

CONSERVATIVE BURGLARY SHOCK

THE CONSERVATIVES today highlighted the importance of people being able to defend their property, after the Tory leader Michael Howard revealed that someone had broken into his home and stolen his policies.

"I stupidly left our policy that homeowners should be able to use any force necessary to defend their property lying on a table in the hall," said the distraught Conservative leader.

"And when I came home from scaring the carol-singers someone had taken it."

Police say they wish to speak to a man seen running from Mr Howard's house whom they describe as being middle aged, white and the Prime Minister.

"The dish might well have run away with the spoon, but being out with a knife is a different matter, madam..."

NATIVITY SCENE CONDEMNED

A PRIMARY school in Kent has been forced to defend a controversial nativity scene that depicts Joseph and Mary and Baby Jesus as Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus.

"While we realise this representation of Christ's birth is offensive to those people who worship David and Victoria Beckham, we believe this image in no way tarnishes their godlike status," said the school's headmaster Mr *(cont. p. 94)*

THAT EASTENDERS CHARLES KENNEDY SCRIPT IN FULL

(Man enters the Queen Vic public house)

Peggy Mitchell: I think you've had enough, Mr Kennedy.

(Ends)

Daily Mail

DAVID BLUNKETT An Apology

OVER the last few weeks, in common with all other newspapers, we may have inadvertently given the impression that we in some way believed Mr Blunkett to be unfit for high office. Headlines such as 'Blunkett's Lover's Nanny Visa Shame', 'Fast Track Your Own Resignation, Home Secretary' and 'Go Now, You Bearded Bastard' may have led readers to believe that this newspaper felt that Mr Blunkett should relinquish his post at the Home Office.

We now realise that nothing could be further from the truth and that, on the contrary, Mr Blunkett was a political colossos amongst pygmies with an extraordinary record of achievement in office, as well as huge personal courage and dedication. His departure is a tragic loss to the government, this nation and indeed the whole world.

© *The David Mail* (Surely *'The Daily Blunkett'*? Ed.)

That Blunkett Resignation Speech In Full

...love ...sacrifice ...little lad ...toddler ...integrity ...decency ...little one ...honesty ...holding baby ...responsibility ...family ...care ...little boy ...my fourth and youngest ...got caught lying by my own enquiry, er ...did I mention the little boy? *(continues for several hours)*

Great Moments In Comedy

To fast track one visa application, Mr Blunkett, might be considered a misfortune. To fast track two looks like carelessness

"The Importance of Being Sacked" Act 3

BLUNKETT
The Timetable Of Events

Wednesday 3.27pm
Journalists all leave early to go Christmas shopping.

Wednesday 5.55pm
Blunkett resigns.

Wednesday 5.56pm
Editor says "Fuck!".

Wednesday 6.01pm
Journalists told to come back to office and write thousands of words on Blunkett saga.

Wednesday 6.03pm
Journalists go to bottom of barrel to find clichés.

Wednesday 7.03pm
Journalists go to barrel beneath earlier barrel.

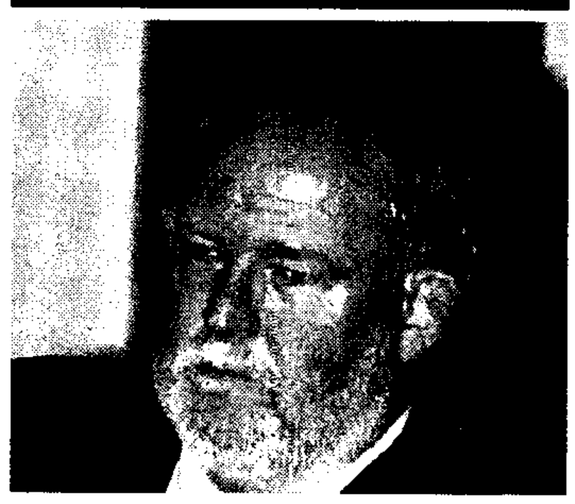
Wednesday 7.32pm
Editor says "I know – why don't we do a Timetable of Events? They always fill up some space."

THAT CABINET RESHUFFLE IN FULL

OUT GOES

Bearded bully. Thought to be arrogant, overbearing and short tempered.

IN COMES



Bully with beard. Thought to be short tempered, arrogant and overbearing.

PLUS

Woman you haven't heard of. Thought to be a woman although you have never heard of her.

'LIVING WILL' OPENS DOOR TO EUTHANASIA

by Our Medical Staff **Hugh Thanasier**

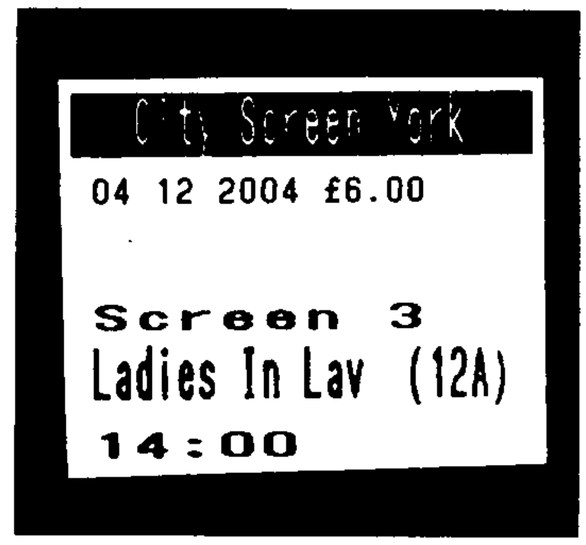
HISTORY was made last night when a 57-year-old Home Secretary won the right to commit professional suicide. In his 'Living Will', Mr David Blunkett dictated a letter to his friend Stephen Pollack, in which he said "Everyone in the Cabinet is rubbish apart from me".

This made it clear that he wished to terminate his career and last night spin doctors turned off his life support machine.

Gasping For Blair

Said the Prime Minister, who was at Mr Blunkett's side in his last moments, "David wanted to go. It would have been cruel to put him through any more torment. That is why the only humane option was to end his career and let him pass on with dignity."

Baroness Warnock is 94.



THE
UKRAINE PRESS GAZETTE
Friday 24 December 2004

Before

After

WAS OPPOSITION LEADER POISONED?

by Our London Staff R. Senic and Di Oxin

RUMOURS are sweeping the British capital that the massively unpopular Opposition leader Mikhail Howard has been poisoned.

Nothing else, say observers, could explain the extraordinary change which has come over the Transylvanian-born party leader in the last few weeks.

"A month ago," said a close colleague, "Mikhail still seemed to be his old ineffective self. But then suddenly he became even more useless, talking total gibberish.

"Now he's making no sense at all on anything. Yesterday, for instance, he said that ID cards were a fundamental assault on liberty, and that he was all for them.

Headless Chicken Kiev

"It's the same on everything. The war. Europe. Tax. Fish. You name it – he's against it and for it in the same breath. There can only be one explanation. Someone has put something in his brown windsor soup."

Howard is known to have had dinner recently at the Beefsteak Club with members of the security services. When he returned home before dawn, his wife noticed that there was blood on his breath and that two of his teeth were protruding unnaturally.

"Something had clearly happened to Mikhail," said Mrs *(contd. p. 94)*

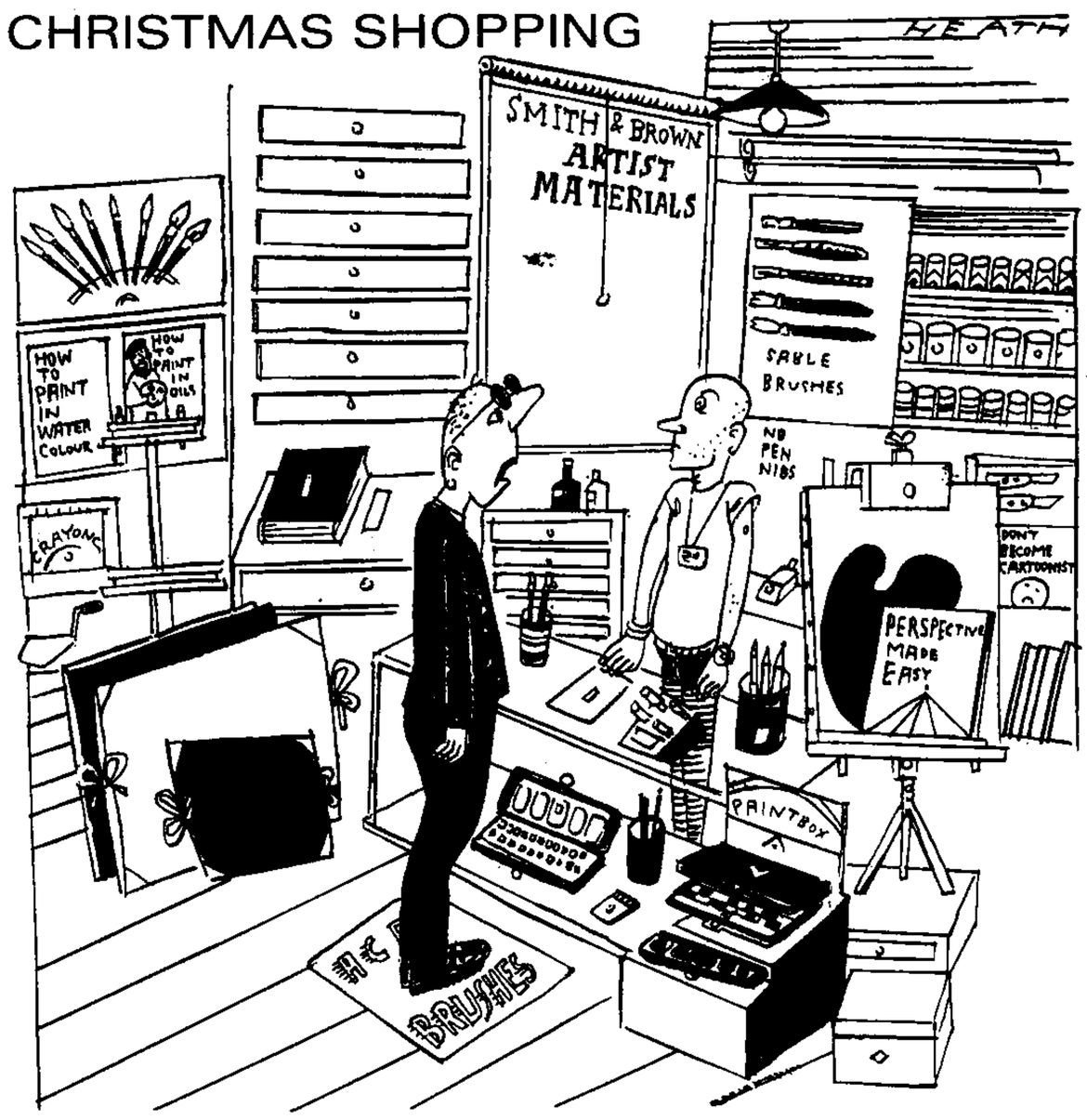
MAN SHOT DEAD BY POLICE NOT BACK AT WORK

by Our Firearms Staff **Scott Free**

AN INNOCENT man who was mistakenly shot dead by armed police whilst carrying a table leg in a plastic bag will not be going back to work this week.

A spokesman for the deceased said: "The man in question won't be returning to his job after being shot and killed by armed police officers due to the fact that he is no longer alive.

The policemen involved have of course already been reinstated. *(Reuters)*



"Do you sell talent?"

POLLY FILLER'S CHRISTMAS ROUND ROBIN

Dear everyone,

It's been quite a year for the Filler family, with Polly's best-selling book *Mummy For Old Rope* storming the best-seller lists on both sides of the Atlantic(!), not to mention the Pacific and the Mediterranean(!!!).

In April, Polly heard that *Mummy For Old Rope* (£7.99) was to be made into a hugely successful Hollywood film, with Scarlett Johansson playing Polly! The director – somebody or other called Sam Mendes(!!!) – wasn't sure that Scarlett was good-looking enough, but since Polly is too busy working on the sequel *Mummy Doesn't Grow On Trees!*, she will have to do!

Toddler Charlie continues to dazzle his teachers, who think he is a prodigy, but I say that a reading age of 25 when you are three-and-a-half is par for the course in the Filler family!

I won't go on about his grade eight violin, lead in the school play, captaincy of the soccer, rugger and debating teams, or his conditional place at Oxford because we don't want him to get big-headed!! Not that he would, because everyone says he is the most lovely, funny child they have ever met and so like his mum!

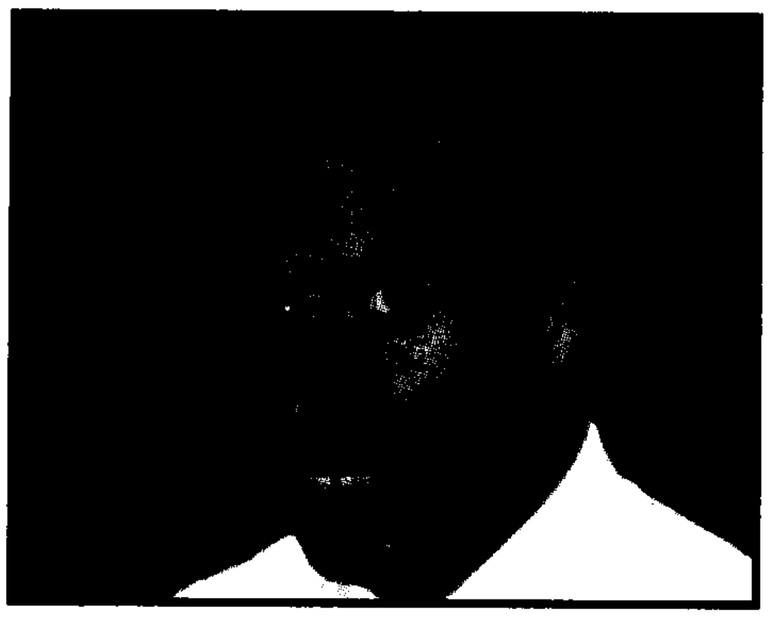
Meanwhile, the Useless Simon has had a particularly useless year, mostly lying around in front of his new plasma screen television, watching 'Jeremy Clarkson Test Drives A Smart Bomb' on BBC 94. When he wasn't doing that he was out at the Sports Bar watching Pro Celebrity Sex Change, introduced by A.A. Gill and Paul Ross on the Sky Nasty Channel!

2004 proved a record year for au-pairs as we went through 27 – in one month! Our latest has selfishly deserted us for Christmas, returning to her home in Sudan to look for her missing relatives. Well, more fool Darfuria because she's going to miss the best Christmas ever!

Oh, and my parents died.

Wishing you all a Happy Christmas and a Filler-tastic 2005!

Polly, Useless Simon & Charlie



JOYEUX NOEL WITH DAVID LINLEY

My childhood Christmases at Windsor Castle were frankly the most tremendous fun. It was all very informal. We'd be dressed up in our suits and ties on Christmas Eve, then, after Prince Philip had briefly inspected us, Her Majesty would come in and be terribly friendly, asking each of us in turn how far we had come, what the traffic was like, any plans for the coming year, and so forth.

There'd be hoots of laughter if anyone cracked a joke! I remember when I was ten or eleven, Prince Philip told a knock-knock joke – I forget what exactly! But the Queen Mother said, "Frankly, I don't understand it!" and of course we all laughed – because we didn't either!

DAVID'S STYLE TIP: **Why not try a roast turkey for that special meal this Christmas? Turkey has been served at Christmas in England for many years now, and is rapidly becoming a very real part of the Christmas tradition.**

After our presentation to Her Majesty, we'd gather around the electric heater to open our gifts. When we were unwrapping, we took care to keep the paper, the gift tags and the string for future use. Once we'd taken the present out of its packaging, we were made to put it back again neatly, ready for opening the same time, next year. It was all part of the fun.

DAVID'S STYLE TIP: **Red is a great colour to put with red. Red and red – the two go together splendidly – and lend that little bit of festive cheer to your Christmas table.**

But we never forgot that it was Christmas for the servants, too. After we'd opened our presents, a bell would be rung and the servants would line up to collect their presents. It was the same every year – a tangerine and a shiny new sixpenny piece for every single one of them – and of course they were overwhelmed! Then for between six and seven minutes, those of us in the Royal Family would "mix in" with the servants, chatting informally, asking them all who they were, and what exactly it was that they did, and whether they were having a Happy Christmas. It was the highlight of their year. Then another bell would go, and they be shepherded out, their faces wreathed in smiles, another great Christmas over for them for another year.

DAVID'S STYLE TIP: **By all means enjoy your Christmas tree, but do not try to eat it. Those pine-needles may look tempting, but feasting on them may result in choking fits, stomach cramps and even death. Chez Linley, we always post a large notice on our Yuletide tree, outlined in marvellously festive reds and golds, warning people of the danger. Feeling peckish? Then why not try potato crisps, fancy nuts, or seasonal olives as a safer alternative?**

After the servants' presents came the main event – presents for the dogs, of course! We all brought our dogs with us to the Castle – isn't that what everyone does? – and after they'd been carried in and brushed down and sat on their special embroidered cushions, we'd send the servants away to make it more personal and then we'd give each dog a really smashing present – something we'd taken a great deal of time making ourselves, or that we'd ordered well in advance from Bond Street.

DAVID'S STYLE TIP: **For something that little bit different, why not get your estate workmen to hand-paint your roof-tiles in gorgeous golds and silvers? But make sure they're all up on the roof scrubbing it back to normal on Boxing Day, or it could begin to look tacky!**

Christmas lunch at Windsor Castle was always a delightfully informal occasion. We were permitted to talk about anything at all – as long as we waited until it was our turn, of course! But often the food was so delicious that we preferred to eat in silence, while the servants looked on, appreciatively.

Christmas crackers were always left until after the pudding had been cleared away. We were then each given our own cracker, and allowed to open it and look at the gift and 'motto' inside. We were allowed to memorise the motto but we'd have to take special care not to damage or crease the cracker in anyway, or else it would look a bit grotty for next year!

DAVID'S STYLE TIP: **Why not buy some decorations to brighten up your Christmas tree? They are available from leading stockists.**

I come from a highly creative family. Every Christmas, we would spend an enjoyable hour or more watching my late mother, HRH Princess Margaret, trying to construct swan-shapes out of napkins. Then we would stay standing while she treated us all to a full-length rendition of that classic Christmas melody, "Chopsticks" on the pianoforte. It would sometimes last well into the night!

DAVID'S STYLE TIP: **Plan ahead. We always plan our family Christmas decor in early July. This gives us plenty of time to commission a really first-rate fairy for the tree from a top craftsman, and we can get going with theming and designing our Christmas crackers too!**

Boxing Day at Windsor Castle was very much a time for "taking it easy" and "having a bit of a chuckle". At eleven o'clock sharp, Prince Philip would come into the State Drawing Room with one of his famous Whoopee Cushions. He would then blow it up, force each of us in turn to sit on it, and roar with laughter. Tremendous fun! Then the Prince of Wales would read a few verses from Kahlil Gibran, explaining what they meant to him personally. Finally Prince Edward would enter in his stillettoes dressed as a buxom serving-wench, his face painted with rouge and mascara, and he'd recite a comic monologue in a very humorous cockney accent. The moment Prince Philip got up, walked out and slammed the door, that would be our signal for offs. Usually, it would be a matter of seconds – a most memorable ending to another happy Christmas.

As told to
CRAIG BROWN

Celeb

LIGGER

I ADMIT YOU HAD AN UNCONVENTIONAL UPBRINGING, TROY. IT WAS COS OF MY ROCKSTAR LIFESTYLE.
IT WAS WEIRD, DAD. ESPECIALLY WHEN I WAS A LITTLE BOY...
BUT I WAS A CARING FATHER... I GAVE YOU SOME VALUES... I TRIED TO DO WHAT I THOUGHT BEST AT THE TIME...
I MADE SACRIFICES FOR YOU, SON. A LOT OF SACRIFICES...
I KNOW, DAD...
I HATED BEING BROUGHT UP AS A DRUID... IT WAS EMBARRASSING...
WELL, A BIT DAFT, I'LL GRANT YOU...

● *"Craig Brown's Imaginary Friends... a classy collection of parodies of celebrities, politicians, writers and so forth" – Daily Telegraph Books pages* ●

Literary Review

Season's bleatings

ALAS, just when you thought it was safe to venture back into the water of the weekend and weekly books pages, so the tide slaps down on to the beach *another* oozing discharge of Books of the Year selections: all clogging up vast amounts of space and all displaying the faults of this highlight of the book world's year with an exemplary punctiliousness.

For the inevitable bouts of egotistical throat-clearing, one only had to turn to the *Spectator*. "In 1958, aged 18, I sat a history entrance exam at Balliol College, Oxford, and got through to the interview" began Bevis Hillier's customarily epic contribution. Rambling on through an account of Hillier's first day at Oxford and his attempt to become art critic of the *Cherwell*, this turned out to be the preamble to a puff for a biography of the historian Herbert Butterfield.

Two pages further on, just as inappropriately, Roger Lewis could be found using Jonathan Coe's life of B.S. Johnson as the excuse to pat himself on the back. "Am I to blame for the proliferation of funny footnotes?" Lewis self-advertisingly mused. "In my Hawtrey and Burgess biographies I undermined the main text with mock-scholarly digressions and unnecessary annotations and now everybody is doing it." In the *Times Literary Supplement*, on the other hand, Clive James noted that he came late to W.G. Sebald's *On The Natural History of Destruction* "because I thought I knew everything about the Allied bombing campaign against Nazi Germany."

Elsewhere if there still existed somewhere asleep beneath a table in the Groucho a solitary punter who didn't know how highly A.S. Byatt rates David Mitchell's Booker-shortlisted *Cloud Atlas*, reassurance could be found in triplicate. Having commended it to readers of the *Guardian*, Dame Ant went on to tell the *Mail on Sunday* that it was "the most exciting novel I've read this year. All six of its tales are both strong stories and perfectly pitched parodies of other stories", and the *Times Literary Supplement* that it was a "tour de force" ("Mitchell has enough storytelling and linguistic energy for six novels and interweaves them brilliantly into one"). Another Byatt *Guardian* selection, oddly enough, was *The Fit* by her great chum Philip Hensher.

One always marvels at the ability of critics to strike several contrasting notes in the course of a couple of paragraphs. So Zadie Smith in the *Guardian* managed to start with the humble (when considering the B.S. Johnson book), go on to the judicious (Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* was "opinionated, a little infuriating, passionate") and end up with the lofty (Colm Toibin's *The Master* was "grown up fiction for people who love real novels").

Further down the page could be observed lashings of the craft solidarity that invariably afflicts journalists whenever one of their number writes a book. Unsurprisingly John Snow thought Andrew Marr's *My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism* "an intelligent roller-coaster ride", while Polly Toynbee rated it as "acidly perspicacious".

Polyglot egg-heads abounded. Frederic Raphael in the *TLS* went for Pierre Hadot's *Le Voile d'Isis*, "a book-length meditation on Heraclitus's famous dictum "*ee physis philei kyrptesthai*" (usually translated as "Nature likes to hide itself"). Back in the *Spec*, Hensher was praising Christoph Hein's *Landnahme* ("the DDR novelist who seems to be surviving best.") Meanwhile, in the *Mail on Sunday* John Mortimer could be found cosying up to Ruth Rendell only an inch away from Ms Rendell's own by-line, while John Major plumped for his old cabinet protégé William Hague's life of Pitt the Younger.

Equally snug were the comments of the former Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway. Asked by the *Scotsman* which book he would most like to see written, he suggested a "lovingly written biography" of Scottish poet Norman MacCaig.

And there was belated consolation for Will Buckley, whose novel *The Man Who Hated Football* did not make the shortlist for the William Hill prize (see last *Eye*) but was named by the *Observer* as one of the five best sports books of the year – a "hilarious novel about a man with a shambolic personal life and a job he hates, as a football reporter". Buckley is, of course, a staff writer on the *Obs* but there wasn't space to mention this.

Score-settler of the year award: Bevis Hillier's trashing of A.N. Wilson's novel *My Name is Legion*: "Fresh from the 'triumph' of his book on the Victorians, in which he managed to miss out Brunel, not regarded by most of us as a Victorian slouch, Wilson has returned to fiction, but I'm afraid this flabbily plotted novel soon lost me." Afraid? I think not. Why do editors carry on printing this guff?

"To hear this message again or to find out more about the Christmas Story, visit our website at www.heaven.org/goodnews"

The Worstsellers List

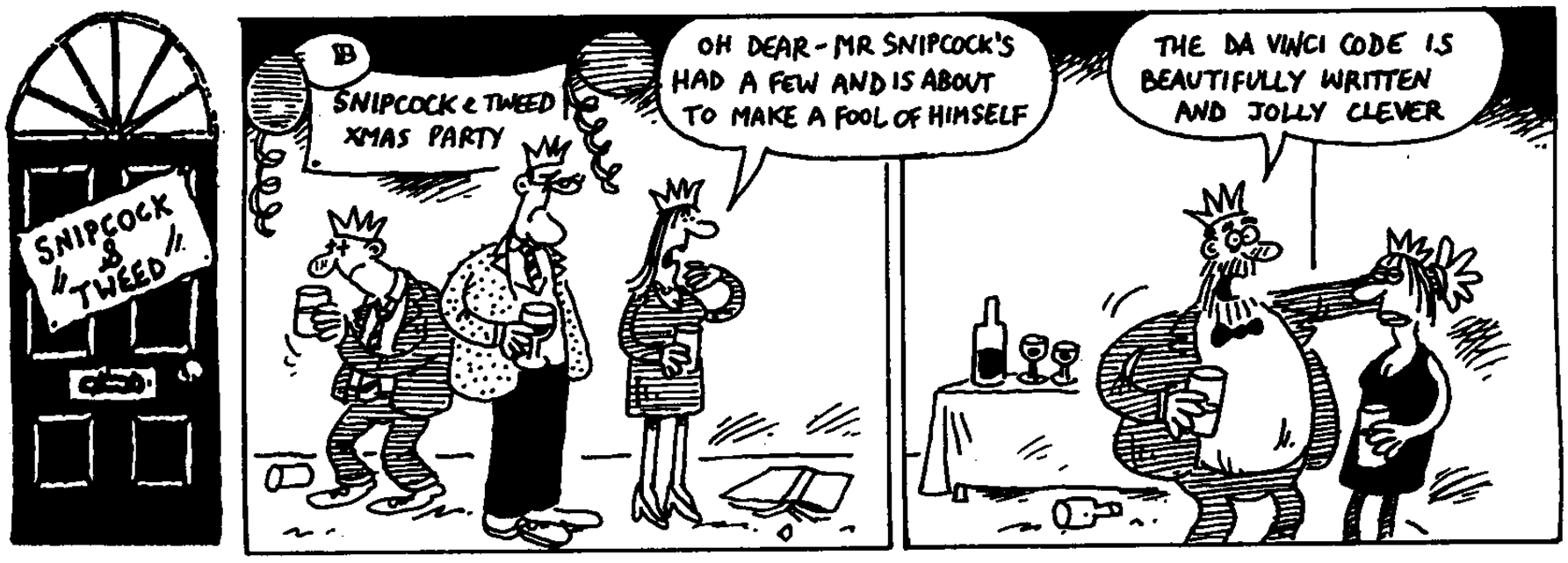
■ AS publishers settled down to their Christmas dinners, there was only one question at every table: who had the biggest turkey?

The individual winner was Rageh Omaar's Revolution Day: The Human Story of the Battle for Iraq. Viking/Penguin signed up Omaar last year while he was still famous as the BBC's Scud Stud in Baghdad; but by the time the book appeared in March 2004 almost everyone had forgotten who he was. In the first four months after publication it sold 4,729 copies. How many more have been bought since is unknown; but it can't be much over 1,000 as Revolution Day then toppled out of BookScan's top 5,000 titles, never to return.

And how much did Viking pay Omaar for this flightless gobbler, which isn't even in the 5,000 top-selling titles? A modest £600,000.

In the group category, however, the clear winner was HarperCollins for having produced so many of the year's biggest loss-makers. It shelled out £600,000 for Jon Snow's autobiography, Shooting History, which has sold under 10,000 copies so far – netting the publisher about £70,000. Worse still was Greg Dyke's Inside Story, with sales of just 8,000: this means HarpicCollins has earned back only £60,000 of the £500,000 advance it rashly paid earlier this year when Dyke was briefly newsworthy.

In fiction, HarperCollins invested many of its hopes – and a wallet-boggling advance of £500,000 – in The Way the Crow Flies, a novel by the Canadian author Ann-Marie MacDonald. The hardback, which appeared at the end of last year, has sold just over 2,000 copies. June 2004 brought a paperback edition but this too has yet to impinge on the bestseller lists, with total sales of 10,000. Turkey leftovers all round!


SNIPCOCK & TWEED
SNIPCOCK & TWEED XMAS PARTY
OH DEAR - MR SNIPCOCK'S HAD A FEW AND IS ABOUT TO MAKE A FOOL OF HIMSELF
THE DA VINCI CODE IS BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN AND JOLLY CLEVER

THE NEOPHILIACS

"Candles are the new socks." – Janey Lee Grace, Radio 2.

"Nipples are the new cleavage." – Alison MacLeod, *Prospect*.

"Foursomes are the new threesomes." – *Sex on the Settee*, Channel 5.

"Boring is the new beautiful." – *Toronto Globe & Mail*.

"Shopping is not only the new sex but the new feminism." – Chrissy Iley, *Daily Mail*.

"Concrete is the new black." – Laura Craik, *Evening Standard*.

"HIV has become the new hypertension." – Dr Phil Hammond, *NHS* magazine.

The borrowers

The Body of Jonah Boyd

David Leavitt

(Bloomsbury, £14.99)

MAN writes novel. Man dies before novel can be published. Someone else gets hold of novel and publishes it under their own name, thereby gaining fame and/or fortune.

If this sounds like a good idea for a book, beware: we have been here before – and not just once.

As noted in Eye 1059, the same idea forms the basis of Alan Warner's Morvern Callar (1995), Terence Blacker's Kill Your Darlings (2000) and John Colapinto's About The Author (2001). So at what point does a conga-line of fictional plagiarism become instead a little genre of its own?

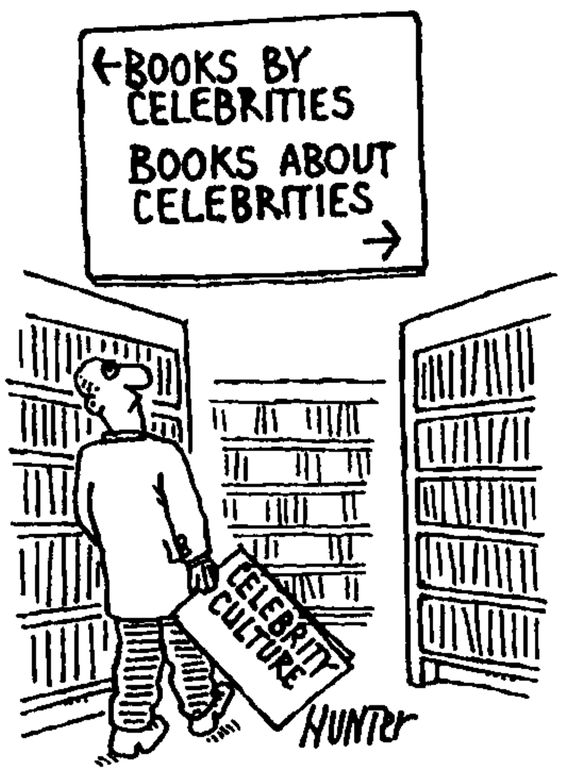
In David Leavitt's version a dysfunctional teenage poet called Ben Wright gets hold of the precious notebooks in which the Jonah Boyd of the title, a successful writer, has written the only copy of his latest novel. Boyd has married Ben's mother's best friend and comes to stay for Thanksgiving.

After dinner he reads from his novel. Everyone thinks it's wonderful. Ben is then allowed to read a poem but only Boyd is kind enough to say anything nice about it.

The fact that Boyd is the only person to take any interest in Ben's poetical drivellings does not hinder Ben from later taking possession of those precious notebooks, without which Boyd is unable to complete the novel. Boyd suffers writer's block, takes to drink and soon afterwards dies, predictably enough, in a car crash.

Many years later Ben, now a dysfunctional grown-up (failed) novelist, digs out Boyd's old notebooks and types up that great lost novel. Ben tells himself he is only doing this to test the editor who keeps rejecting his own fiction. Is it just him she doesn't like? It turns out to be his work, because of course she just loves the "new" novel. Publication, fame and fortune duly follow.

By then anyone who might have remembered the work which Boyd read out from his notebooks at that Thanksgiving dinner party has conveniently died or disappeared. The one exception is Ben's father's old secretary, Judith Denham, the "narrator" of the story. However, she conveniently fails to read Ben's novel when it first comes out, allowing the story to extend its timespan and develop a brief detectivy bit and a couple of clever little twists towards the end. For example, has her narrative in fact been ghosted by Ben himself (as she used to ghost Ben's father's academic papers)? Or has she, instead, adopted and finished off a work entirely of his imagination?

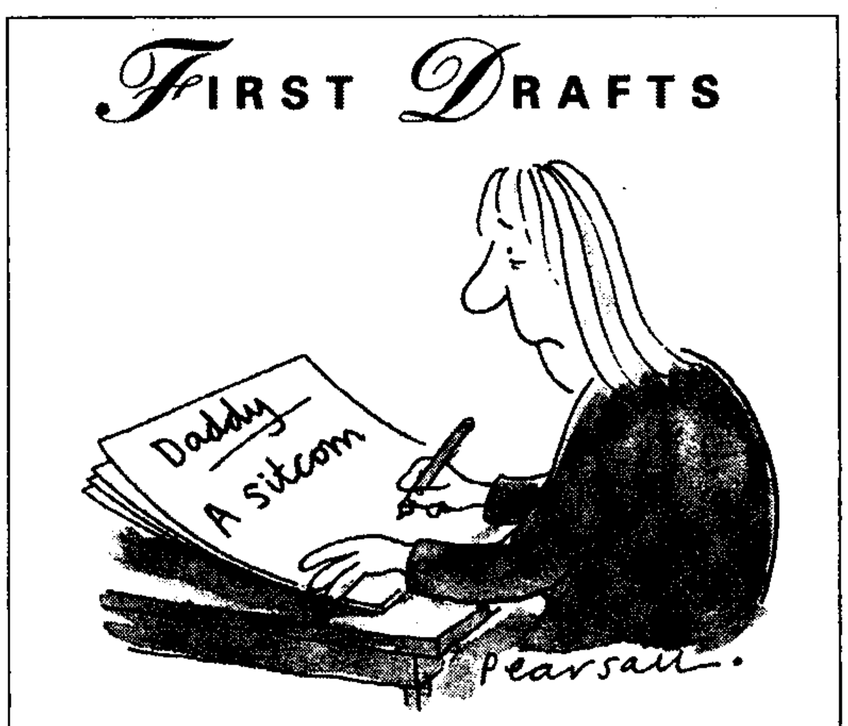


The plagiarist plagiarised.

Leavitt is strong on the nuts and bolts of his story, all that stuff about the talismanic notebooks, the blank page or screen confronting the blocked writer, those disappointing lunches with editors. In fact it's a classic bit of writing about writing, of which we've had rather too much this year already: see Eyes 1101 and 1102 for a general survey of such stuff, including Tobias Wolfe's Old School (another one about plagiarism), Paul Auster's Oracle Night (another one about a writer's talismanic notebooks) and Muriel Spark's The Finishing School (another one about literary envy).

Nor is Leavitt himself a stranger to this self-indulgent genre. His own last novel, Martin Bauman, was all about a self-regarding writer. Some reviewers seemed to think it was intended to be autobiographical. But if he was talking about someone else, it wouldn't be the first time he'd borrowed from another writer's life: as recorded in John Sutherland's flawed hagiography (reviewed in Eye 1109) Stephen Spender responded with a writ when he found bleeding chunks of his memoir World Within World reiterated if not wholesale then at least retail in Leavitt's novel While England Sleeps. The matter was settled out of court but this does not stop Sutherland fuming about "book rape".

To be fair to Leavitt, the borrowings were selective and he had intended (so he said) to acknowledge their source, only his publisher wouldn't let him. But it does mean he cannot claim to be ignorant as well as innocent on the subject of literary larceny. Of course, great minds do occasionally think alike and it is not unheard of for the same idea or premise to surface in more than one book. Subject to that prudent disclaimer (insisted upon by m' learned friends), it does rather look as though Leavitt, in serving up the body of Boyd, is not just reporting on, but actually engaging in, a feast of literary cannibalism.



Sylvia Plath

Among the great novelists perhaps only Balzac had the range and power to deal properly with the tragedy which has engulfed my friend and colleague Kimberly Quinn of the Spectator and the Home Secretary David Blunkett.

PETER OBORNE
Evening Standard

It's a job many people with half a brain and an iota of beauty assume they're capable of accomplishing. But presenting the weather requires credibility and masses of scientific knowledge. After all, what I broadcast can save lives.'

SIAN LLOYD
Guardian

I like APC jeans. They often get noticed and they offer a panoply of trouser experiences, from their dark stiff stage at the beginning when they look quite dressy and smart, to their properly worn-in stage at the end where you love and cherish them because of all the work that your bum, knees and washing machine have put into them. That said, I'm not totally convinced by the way they fade – sometimes they go too pale at the knee and not enough elsewhere, which is why I can't share Touitou's prejudice against pre-washed jeans where the fading is more artful.

JAMES DELINGPOLE
The Times

Pseuds Corner

The Brink by Jacob Polley (Picador)
This is an extraordinary and beautiful collection of poetry. It is, by turns, a songbook; an archaeological dig; a reconstitution of the household ordinary; a tidal, totemic manifesto; a landscape of reflection, disruption, curiosity; and the tonic to its own aches. Every poem, every word, has gentle luminosity – there is the strange and lovely phenomenon of the moon rising above the pages every time they open.

SARAH HALL
Guardian Books of the Year

Monsters Inc. features a slug named Roz, voiced by a man, who wears a baggy cardigan and thick-rimmed spectacles, a thoroughly disagreeable character who is immune to the manly charms of one-eyed Mikey. The cartoon points if not her desire for other females, then to her ambivalence towards males. The out-takes make her implied lesbianism more explicit, when we witness her emerging from a shower curtain, a loo cubicle and finally from the monster Sully's closet. This paper reads Roz's triple outing as a parodic commentary on the (lesbo) sexualising of female villains in other cartoons, such as The Little Mermaid and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. This paper will also attend to how cartoons, such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, occlude lesbian desire, in addition to how postmodernist efforts (e.g. Shrek) comment on such heteronormative products often with hilarious results.

Abstract of a paper entitled 'Who's that Slug in My Closet? Outing the Lesbian in Monsters Inc. and Other Cartoon', given by NOREEN GIFFNEY at a University College London Queer Studies seminar.

Pseuds Corporate

Dear Customer
I write to inform you that in order to accommodate additional business on the milk round which serves your area it has become necessary to rationalise the rounds delivery profile. As from week commencing 6th December I will deliver in your area on Monday, Wednesday and Fridays, which will facilitate an efficient delivery and Regular Fortnightly collection.

Letter sent to Dairy Crest customers in the Cardiff under the signature of 'Your Dairy Crest Milkman'

CONTRIBUTORS: Michele Kirsch, Jo Bunting, Mark Vagges, Anon, John Pitcher, Brenda Gibbons.

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

PFI HOSPITALS

NHS blind spot

OPPONENTS of a scheme that forced South West Oxfordshire primary care trust (PCT) to buy private eye operations have been vindicated by an official report.

Last July the government pressurised the PCT to buy into its "diagnostic and treatment centres" scheme, paying for cataract operations in mobile surgeries as part of a national deal between the NHS and the South African health company, Netcare.

The PCT board was bullied into backing down; and chairman Martin Avis and board members including Jane Hanna resigned. But a report by management consultants Finnamore, commissioned by the Thames Valley strategic health authority, the NHS body which pushed the decision through, shows that this latest privatisation actually threatens the NHS. Moreover, the NHS must now "manage the risks" created by private eye operations as a "matter of urgency".

While an early draft of the report was even more critical, saying the additional capacity for eye operations was "inappropriately located", even the toned down final version admits that the extra operations needlessly duplicate NHS work: "The activity clearly substitutes capacity within the NHS that is already sufficient to meet the demands of the local population."

The report echoes one of the points Avis and Hanna made at the time – that existing NHS hospital eye services are generally considered to be of a very high standard, so buying extra surgery from Netcare was pointless. Worse, the contract threatens NHS finances generally, and the Oxford Eye Hospital in particular, as operations are switched from it to Netcare and Eye Hospital staff miss out on training.

The risks highlighted by the report were of course avoidable. The report was commissioned before the Netcare deal was signed and should have been published before any decision was made. But it was inexplicably delayed and the NHS demanded that Oxfordshire agree to the deal before publication.

Jimmy's in the dark

THE new private finance initiative (PFI) development at St James's Hospital in Leeds is off to a shaky start, plunging the main hospital buildings into darkness with building work hardly begun.

Foundations being dug by contractors Bovis Lend Lease for the £220m, 11-storey specialist cancer treatment centre collapsed on to a gas pipe and electricity cables on 18 November. Emergency generators kept "Jimmy's" operating theatres and essential life-saving equipment working, but parts of the hospital were in darkness for hours, computers and phone lines went down and many outpatient appointments and non-emergency operations had to be cancelled.

When completed, the cancer centre will be the first PFI scheme to include major medical equipment provision as well as buildings and facilities management. But it's also a pilot project for the latest PFI wheeze.

Dubbed the "holy grail" of PFI by its fans, the treasury's new credit guarantee financing (CGF) sees the treasury making huge cheap loans to the private sector, thus avoiding involving third party banks with their more expensive private loans. Proper banks have yet to make a great deal of noise about the treasury picking their pockets like this, but it can only be a matter of time if the scheme expands as planned.

The contractors simply have to find a credit-worthy financial institution, in this case Bank of Scotland, to give a guarantee that the loans will be paid back if the PFI vehicle company or its parent can't pay, in return for a fee. All of which means the government will find itself receiving loan repayments with one hand while paying for the lease and facilities management with the other.

With the money going round and round as the government lends the money *and* pays for the services, it's hard to see how this is a *private finance* initiative any more, except in terms of the contractors' profits. But then it's hard to see anything with the lights out.

PENSIONS

Into the Sun set

THE fate of another few thousand people's life savings looked less certain last week as more funds that had been entrusted to large, once reputable life insurance companies were flogged off to obscure private investment managers.

Eye 1120 reported the sale by Royal and Sun Alliance (RSA) of its closed fund to an outfit called Resolution so that RSA can distance itself from customers it ripped off in the great mis-selling scandals (or in Resolution's words "liberate their brand from any continuing negative perceptions").

This trend is gathering pace as insurance company HHG has sold its failed Pearl, NPI and London Life funds, containing money belonging to thousands of mis-selling victims, this time to a body called Life Company Investor Group, a venture between private equity groups Sun Capital Partners and TDR capital, the latter backed by a hedge fund called Tudor.

Sun Capital Partners, run by entrepreneur Hugh Osmond, specialises in making money very quickly from ventures such as Pizza Express; while Tudor, like all hedge funds, looks to make large amounts of money even more quickly by playing the markets.

A pizza multi-millionaire and a hedge fund operator might not be thought ideal custodians of pension and endowment policies that require careful management over decades. So, in an attempt to reassure nervous savers of the financial reliability of Sun Capital Partners, the *Eye* turned to Companies House for a look at its latest accounts. Six weeks after they were due they still hadn't been submitted.

ASYLUM

Yeah but no

MANSOOR HASSAN, an investigative journalist from Pakistan who sought refuge in Britain after his exposures of corruption in business and political circles led to death threats, has applied to the European court of human rights to overturn the immigration department's refusal to grant him asylum.

The immigration adjudicator Mr J Nicholson did not reject Hassan's claims out of hand, however. Far from it. Mr Nicholson said: "I accept that he wrote an article exposing the chairman of the Agricultural Task Force… for selling adulterated pesticides and uncertified seed and an article about… a member of the provincial assembly, who was involved in some way in an honour killing. I accept that he was threatened by both. I accept that he was beaten up in his office at that time. I accept that his car was rammed with a tractor in or about 1997/1998 and I do not rule out the possibility that this was done by people instructed by [the assembly member]". (The task force chairman is now a federal minister.)

Mr Nicholson also said: "I accept that the appellant and his family was the subject of severe, barbiturate poisoning" in a horrific restaurant incident; but he did not believe this was "deliberate" or part of the campaign of threats against Hassan.

Mr Nicholson did not even think Hassan wrong to flee these attacks, but he refused to grant him asylum because it was felt that he had fled too far. The adjudicator argued that the "option of internal flight remained available to him" -- Hassan could have fled south to Karachi instead of all the way to the UK.

Mr Hassan and his family were also refused asylum because there was a "sufficiency of protection for him" from the police. The National Union of Journalists is backing Hassan's case, emphasising that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both state that Pakistan's military dictatorship and its police, far from protecting journalists, are increasingly intolerant of and prone to imprison them.

NOMS

Another fine mess

AS Charles Clarke eases himself behind his new desk at the home office, he should spend a few moments casting an eye over the "giant mess" (as the outgoing home secretary described the legacy of his own predecessor, Jack Straw) that David Blunkett has left him at the new £4bn national offender management service (Noms).

The merged prison and probation service, responsible for punishment and rehabilitation, has supposedly been running for several months but is still an utter shambles.

Readers will recall that there was no business model for the massive reorganisation and that plans to reduce 49 probation areas to just 10 were abandoned by home office ministers within weeks. Hence "regional offender managers" hired at £70,000 a year were left to work out their own job specs.

Now new consultants poring over another "what Noms will look like" plan have come up with the bright idea of making two-thirds of the probation staff (to be known as "offender managers") work to the 10 regional offender managers. The other third will work locally for a new "public sector intervention organisation".

That, however, is as far as plans go; and at a recent meeting with staff to discuss the changes, officials had no idea which front-line service would stay local and which would shift to the new regions. One official was asked if the new plans had been drawn up on the back of a cigarette packet – and could only mutter that "it was probably the front".

All that looks certain is that the new plans will lead to three levels of bureaucracy instead of two; that more money will be taken away from front-line services to pay for more managers; and that probation hostels and some other probation duties, like the supervision of community penalties, will be freed up for privatisation.

Last month the probation officers' union Napo obtained a copy of a home office internal "risk" assessment of Noms. It was devastating and suggested that the complexity, scope and scale of the merger were so great the whole enterprise stood a high risk of failing. It even questioned whether the merger would reduce numbers in overcrowded jails and ensure appropriate use of the new range of community penalties.

ANTI-TERROR LAWS

Harrying Roberts

HARRY ROBERTS, the infamous "cop killer" of the 1960s, has won the right to challenge in the House of Lords his continued incarceration after 38 years in jail in a test case with wide-ranging implications for the justice system.

Roberts, 68, has served nearly eight years longer than the 30-year tariff set by the trial judge when he and two others were jailed for life for the murder of three police officers in west London. But he now finds himself in the same position as suspected foreign terrorists who are thought to threaten national security: that is, he is being held without charge and without knowing why (a state of affairs the law lords last week ruled illegal in the case of suspected terrorists being held without trial).

The evidence being used to detain Roberts is believed to come from an informer and is being kept secret from him and his lawyers. This makes it impossible for Roberts to answer the charges and makes it more likely that he will die in jail.

In what lawyers and human rights activists have said is a "gross abuse of justice", former home secretary David Blunkett used legislation against Roberts that had been agreed by parliament specifically for use against suspected terrorists in immigration cases. Its use against a common criminal, albeit a man who killed three police officers, was entirely unprecedented.

Any suggestion that the measure was designed to make up for the perceived failure of Blunkett's "messy" predecessor Jack Straw to give Roberts a "whole-life tariff" (like those imposed on Myra Hindley and other notorious killers) would of course be erroneous.

Simon Creighton, Roberts' solicitor, said the case was disturbing on several levels: "There is the obvious injustice of being imprisoned without knowing why. Roberts cannot address his 'offending behaviour', as he needs to for parole, if he doesn't know what that offending behaviour is."

In Roberts' case the parole board appointed a "special advocate", as in terrorism cases, to represent his interest. But even the advocate himself, Nicholas Blake QC, has made clear his belief that advocates have no role in quasi-criminal proceedings (which parole hearings undoubtedly are) because that would be a breach of article six of the human rights convention governing the right to a fair trial.

It is undeniable that Roberts was initially a difficult prisoner. But he knuckled down and by 1999 a parole board recommended he be moved to an open prison to prepare for release. At Sudbury prison in Derbyshire he enjoyed the usual perks of a prisoner nearing freedom. Five days a week he went out to work, travelling by train to an animal sanctuary near Chesterfield. For his 65th birthday in July 2001, he was allowed a few days' "home leave" with the owners of the sanctuary.

Then stories started appearing in the tabloids about parties with criminals and buying a car. Without warning Roberts was taken from Sudbury in handcuffs and moved to a closed prison. A prison service memorandum told him: "You have been removed temporarily from HMP Sudbury in the light of investigations into your alleged involvement in drug dealing and bringing contraband into the prison. If these investigations reveal any inappropriate behaviour on your part, including criminal behaviour, details of any evidence in support of the findings will be disclosed to you and you will be invited to make representations to Lifer Unit."

Instead the veil of anti-terrorism-style secrecy descended... and Roberts remains behind bars.

THE SHOOTING OF HARRY STANLEY

Sir Ian Blur

THE new Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) appears to be as toothless as its predecessor to judge by its handling of Scotland Yard and the fatal shooting of Harry Stanley.

The *Eye* has learnt that the day before the Met police force announced that it was reinstating the two police officers who "unlawfully killed" Mr Stanley, the IPCC had advised it to take the opposite course.

At a meeting with senior Met officers on 9 December, IPPC officials said the two officers – Inspector Neil Sharman and PC Kevin Fagan – should remain suspended pending a decision by the crown prosecution service (CPS) over criminal charges.

Fagan and Sharman were suspended in October after an "unlawful killing" verdict was returned by an inquest jury which rejected their account of the 1999 shooting of Mr Stanley as he returned home from a pub, carrying a table leg in plastic bag. The jury heard that the fatal wound to Mr Stanley's head was caused by a bullet fired from behind at an angle of 110 degrees.

Just 24 hours after the IPCC meeting, however, Sir Ian Blair, the Met police deputy commissioner, effectively stuck two fingers up at the commission when he announced that the pair would return immediately to "non-operational" duties. His move followed a hasty review of the policy governing police suspensions to head off a protest by firearms officers, who had downed their weapons.

Sir Ian also announced that, following approval from the Metropolitan police authority (MPA), Scotland Yard would only use its powers to suspend an officer in future if the commissioner believed his or her behaviour had fallen so far short of the required standard that he or she would ultimately be required to leave the force following a criminal conviction or as a result of a misconduct board.

So not only has the Met ignored the IPCC's advice about the Stanley case, but it has also ignored its concerns about the new proposals to reduce the use of suspensions. For the IPCC also warned that such a policy would create problems for the commissioner who would effectively be seen to be prejudging the evidence. If officers were suspended they could complain that assumed their guilt; and families or complainants could equally well protest if the opposite course were followed.

Whether the MPA was ever told of the IPCC concerns before it approved the new policy is not clear. But Daniel Machover, the solicitor acting for the Stanley family, said: "This stinks. It looks like a stitch-up from beginning to end, designed to head off the officers' protest. My client wants to know what's the point of the MPA if it does not scrutinise these policy changes properly and ensure full consultation." His client also wants to know "why the IPCC didn't act in the public interest or stand up for complainants in any meaningful way, for example by demanding a fuller and proper consultation period."

In November Sir Ian had concluded that the Stanley inquest verdict of unlawful killing "was directed, not at a systems failure, but at the actions of the two officers involved. In accordance with Met police service procedures, it is therefore a fact that the officers remain subject to an allegation of the utmost seriousness, which, if proved, will lead to a severe penalty. Under these circumstances, it is the case that it is contrary to the public interest for the two officers to remain available for duty."

That remains the case today – except that by his decision to reinstate the officers under the new rules, it appears Sir Ian has already pre-judged the case in their favour. And that has already produced the complaints from the family that the IPCC had predicted.

FOLLOW-UPS...

■ ASYLUM: Crispen Kulinji, the Zimbawean facing immediate deportation from Britain (see last *Eye*), has won a temporary reprieve.

This is a relief for Mr Kulinji since the Zimbabwe Association has announced that it has already lost contact with two failed asylum-seekers who were returned to Harare after the home office lifted its ban on returning people to Robert Mugabe's regime. There are serious fears for their safety.

Last week the UN high commissioner for refugees repeated its calls for a ban on deportations to Zimbabwe, but it remains to be seen whether Charles Clarke, the new home secretary, is prepared to listen any more than David Blunkett and his immigration minister Des Browne were.

Mr Kulinji, 32, a well known Zimbabwean opposition activist who travelled here on a Malawian passport after he was beaten and left for dead by Mugabe's henchmen, has been taken off the immediate removal list following the threat of a judicial review and a growing clamour of protest from MPs, peers and activists. His plight was also highlighted by Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change, who was in London last week.

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In the City

A BIZARRE situation has arisen at Boustead, the former Far East agency which is now a finance company with near "shell" status, where auditors have been unable to confirm the existence of the company's major asset.

The 2004 accounts stated that £2.6m had been deposited with a "non-financial institution" in the Cayman Islands about which auditors Kingston Smith had been unable to obtain "any audit evidence". The significance of the deposit can be judged from the fact that Boustead has a market capitalisation of only £1.25m.

The auditors note is stark. "We have requested but not received any audit evidence to confirm the existence of the deposit, its ownership, its recoverability and the currency in which the deposit is denominated or when the monies will be repaid." Confirmation of the deposit had been provided the previous year.

The write-off of all or part of the deposit would have a "significant effect" – something of an audit understatement! Because of this item the auditors, not surprisingly, qualified the report and queried whether the accounts could be prepared on a going concern basis.

At the time the accounts were circulated in early October shareholders were assured by non-executive chairman Sir Thomas Macpherson that this was only a minor glitch caused by the impact of Hurricane Ivan on Grand Cayman and that the audit qualification would be withdrawn if confirmation of the deposit had been provided by the time of the annual general meeting on 26 October. The 84-year-old chairman since 1986 declared that the board "confidently expect" confirmation to be forthcoming by that date.

Well it was not, so the qualification stands. Has the confirmation been produced since? When asked, chief executive Robert Lyons – an accountant based in Grand Cayman – simply replied "no comment" before terminating the call.

However, Sir Thomas Macpherson, a veteran company director, was more informative. He said the deposit was in "a perfectly reputable bank" and money had been coming back in recent weeks to pay expenses. "It is not a cause of difficulty or alarm," he said. The auditors have made "a mistake" and asked for the evidence "at the last minute". Both Boustead and the bank had had to reconstruct their records because of the hurricane.

Hurricane Ivan hit Grand Cayman on 12/13 September with devastating effect. The audit of the Boustead accounts for the year to March 2004 should have been virtually complete by that date, so it is puzzling that confirmation of the major asset had not already been provided. After all the £2.6m compares with total group assets of £2.85m and net assets of £1.7m. The auditors qualified the accounts on 30 September.

But just how difficult can it be to verify where the money is, that it is held for Boustead's benefit and can be repaid even if the relevant documents had been blown away by Ivan? The Cayman authorities were saying that the offshore financial centre (ie tax haven) was back in business within a week. Using the information provided for the 2003 accounts, would it not have been possible to contact the "non-financial institution" or its bank for verification? Yet the auditors were unable to obtain the answers to these simple questions.

The £2.6m represents the balance of the £3.2m proceeds from the sale of Boustead's engineering interests in Hong Kong and China during 2002. The money was placed on deposit paying no interest in early 2003. The deposit was repayable at three months' notice. Sir Thomas said the money related to a proposed contract with a government and interest was not appropriate. He said there was "no risk" and he had received "appropriate assurances" from Lyons who was negotiating the contract.

The lucky recipient is understood to be a company not controlled by Lyons but one with which he has a relationship. Lyons, who joined Boustead in July 2003, is a director of a company management business.

Boustead lost £530,000 last year. It is engaged in what are described as "structured finance" deals through a Cayman company established at the time Lyons joined the board. These generated £600,000 in revenues on which the company managed to lose £31,000.

Boustead's controlling shareholder is Fulton Partners, a company registered on the Caribbean island of Nevis but which shares an address with Lyons in the Grand Cayman capital, Georgetown. Fulton acquired control of Boustead from the purchasers of the Far Eastern interests. It was paid £200,000 last year by Boustead for consultancy services.

The business credentials of two of the individuals associated with Fulton in the UK – David Gough and Brian Copsey – do little to reassure. Gough, now 76, is no stranger to *Private Eye* or business failure. Back in the 1960s he was managing director of Interprop, a Bahamian company selling land in the Bahamas, Malta and the Seychelles. It was not a success.

In 1976 he was part of a syndicate who injected a company with supposedly valuable shipping contracts in the Persian Gulf into a Hong Kong "shell" renamed Gulf Arabian for cash and shares. Within a year Gulf Arabian was in receivership resulting in the subsequent expulsion from the London Stock Exchange of Alan Knapp, the former senior partner of brokers Sandelson who partnered Gough in the deal.

Gough was a director of European e Commerce which collapsed in 2001 and of Teleport (Northern Ireland) which collapsed in 2002. Last year he became chairman of easier plc, the former internet property listing business. This followed the purchase of a large stake by Fulton Partners. He was soon joined as a director by stockbroker Simon Eagle who resigned in July this year shortly before a £10m hole was found at his firm SP Bell. Two months ago easier lost its latest nominated adviser Beaumont Cornish who has yet to be replaced.

Brian Copsey has an equally colourful CV. He was for several years finance director of Gestetner leaving in 1993. He was by then living in Monaco. A year later he was chairman of Speedo sportswear distributor Azure Group which became Alpha Omikron with business interests in medical insurance and Eastern Europe. Then in 1995 he popped up at Greenhills which proposed to run themed restaurants. The one London restaurant was not a success and Greenhills went into receivership in 1996. But not before Copsey and friends had discussed injecting the UK rights to sell a Russian Mafia-controlled vodka business. Shortly after Greenhills collapsed Copsey also left Alpha Omikron. Dealings in the shares were suspended at under one penny in March 1997. Both Greenhills and Alpha were expelled from AIM. The Stock Exchange censured the by now bankrupt Greenhills in 1997 for giving "a significantly misleading impression about the company's financial position".

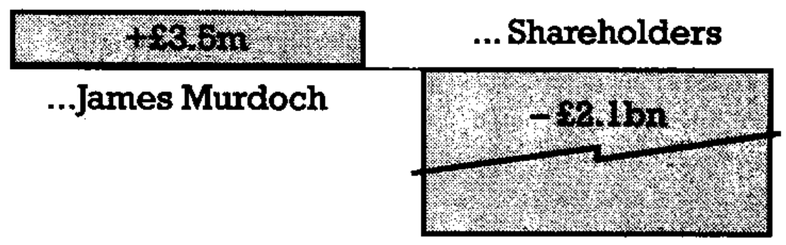
Boustead shares have fallen from 24p before the accounts came out to 17p. Boustead needs to explain convincingly the status of its major asset.

Stock Horror

by 'Bruin'

James Murdoch's first year running Sky: a celebration

Winners and losers since he took over



If not the Stock Exchange and the Financial Services Authority should start paying attention.

CONCERNS about NHS IT software supplier iSOFT are growing as a result of the planned departure of finance director John Whelan, the third director to leave this year.

The others were chief executive Chris Moore and business development director Mark Woodbridge. Big shareholders Friends Provident and Deutsche Bank have also been sellers despite the company's continued confident noises in this month's interim statement.

iSOFT is said to have hired corporate investigators to discover who may be leaking information about the company and its accounting techniques. As disclosed in the last *Eye*, these were termed "aggressive" by Deloitte & Touche when they carried out a due diligence for Torex, taken over last year. This approach could well have seen as much as £30m of the £120m of licence revenue due from NHS contracts with local service providers already recognised in last year's figures.

At a meeting of the iSOFT audit committee in June, auditors RSM Robson Rhodes reported that the group accounting function had been "stretched at times" during 2004. Australia in particular was seen as a problem. The directors accepted that there were "areas of weakness" which they were taking steps to rectify. Robson Rhodes also pressed last June for a group wide accounting system which the audit committee termed a high priority. So too was contract costing.

It is iSOFT Australia which has a £2m-plus problem as a result of the non-payment of an agreed licence fee by Gleneagles Healthcare for the rights to distribute iSOFT software in the Philippines. iSOFT Australia sued Gleneagles in Sydney last March for the A$5m(£2m) licence fee plus another A$760,000 in fees and interest. The agreement had been signed in October 2002 and the £2m was due to be paid the following month. Whether the expected payment was credited into the 2003 results is unclear. What is clear is that full provision for the debt was made in 2004.

While iSOFT still has its fans among the analysts, the City seems to be less convinced. The shares are close to a low for the year.

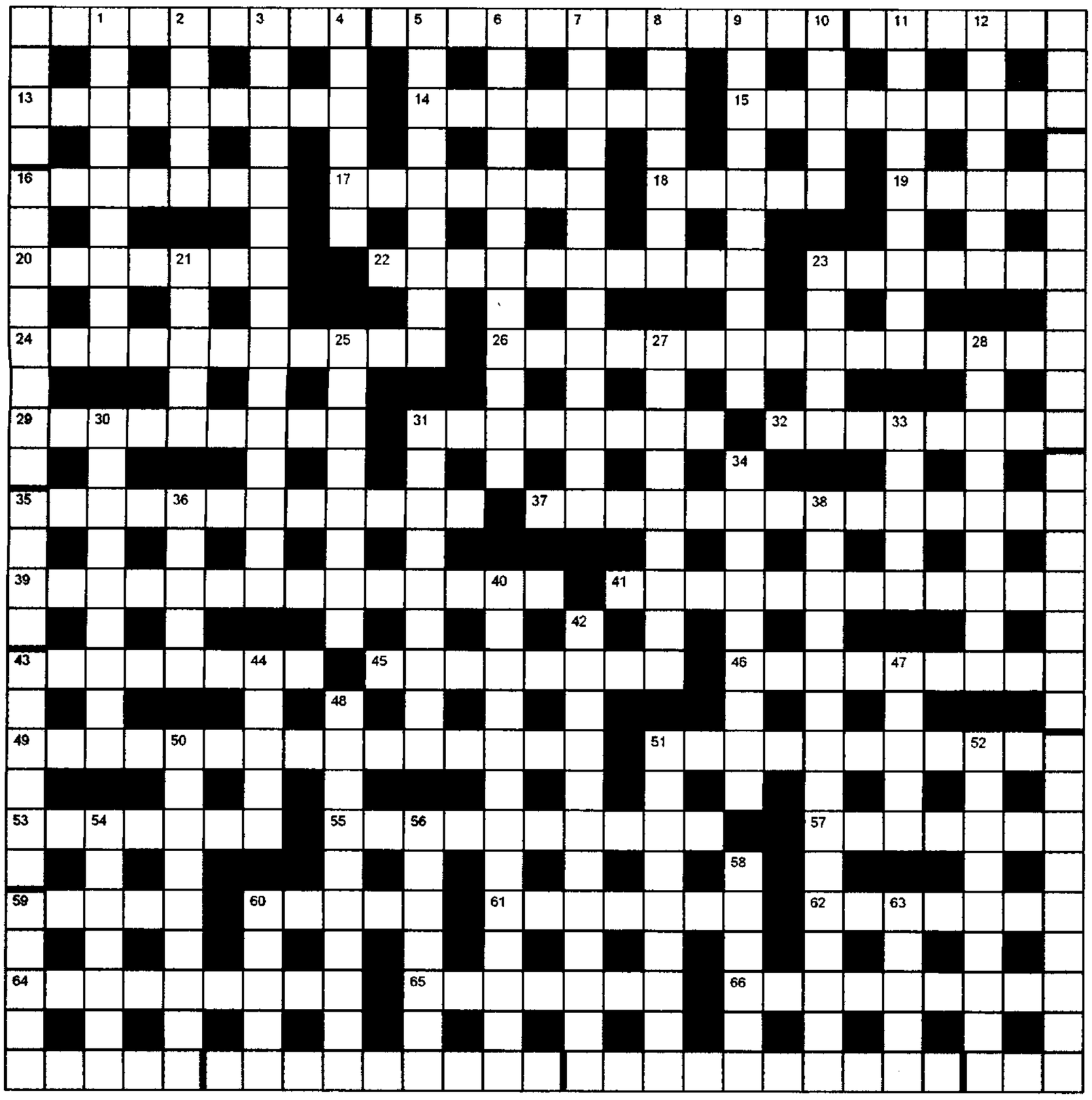
'Slicker'

"I think he wanted a gun"

EYE CROSSWORD 277

£500 PRIZE

by Cyclops



Running clockwise around the perimeter of the grid is a random list of 12 features/people with a Private Eye connection. Heavy lines separate each item; no item starts or ends at a corner square. The following 104 letters make up the perimeter entries: AAAAAAAAAAA BBBB CCCCCC DD EEEEEEEEEE F GGG HHHHHH I J KK LLLLLL MMM NNN OOOOOOOO PPPPPPP RRRRRRR SSSSSSS TTTTTTT UUUU WW YY

ACROSS

13 Enters pissed, imbibing piss from a bung (9)
14 One calling the faithful Edmund I, "screwed up" (7)
15 Bit of an anticlimax, lawyer wed to Blair returning a satirical article (4,5)
16 Somewhat precious arse's input – so pisspoor (3-4)
17 Thoughtful sort of sex: beat whore's client, but not with end of stick (7)
18 Obscure, filthy Conservative ousted by Right (5)
19 God, Cyclops is being gobbled by quiet Virginia! (5)
20 Leave lousy types outside enclosure (7)
22 Bed Blair? Act noncommittal, initially, understood? (8,2)
23 Like the Bush-Blair relationship places one in the shit? (7)
24 Old communist party members: short arses grabbing jeans, including second-hand (11)
26 Out of favour Conservative causing more political disaster involving Howard and Letwin initially (7,8)
29 A quality of the rich Uncle Vanya's ending? Eff off! (9)
31 Act like a doctor in residence in private places (8)
32 Mike's extension tits, hardly the best thing economically (4-4)
35 Obviousness of what Will told the jury? (4-8)
37 It's not worth all the fuss, having an erection after me castration operation (5,2,1,6)
39 Liberal ways of Frank: worker, hack and FBI agent (4-10)
41 Bush's place to mess with "Armchair Tone" (5,7)
43 Avoid the risk of a possible Pinter ear-bashing, Peter! (4,4)
45 Jeered outside House, Tony's number two wept (3-5)
46 Remembering the good points about coital snag: letting one go (9)
49 Touch, say, Delia's bust while squeezing Oz's butt – given the tabloid treatment (15)
51 Whatsit's whatsit needing, er, a tool positioner (11)
53 Bloomers put the fear of God into sprogs, it's said (7)
55 Very important poet, one tending to lash out (3,7)
57 After recent fiasco, end of Conservative Man (7)
59 Topless furniture store model bearing a linesman (5)
60 Right sweat loosening and dropping one's pants ... (5)
61 ... or sperm production for a minor leisure outfit ... (7)
62 ... as an alternative feature of Yeltsin's tea dances (7)
64 In the midst of the action, Hope's not screwed on time (2,3,4)
65 They could protect camp types from (not loud) brown-nose activities (7)
66 "Bachelor" bath aids corrupt, leading to vices (3,6)

DOWN

1 Doubting the church's involved in plastic surgery (9)
2 Pisspoor panto's not hard to come by (2,3)
3 Idea about inner NE TV broadcast not exactly a feature of US foreign policy (3-12)
4 Tony, ditching centre, pursues Right with desperate air of curiosity (6)
5 Massive stink over gun trading ring (American) (9)
6 Thumb stuck between hymen and a turnover – accompaniment to a salad? (6,6)
7 You'd have to be sick to seek relief from this dim niece's wobbly pair of tits (8,5)
8 Mundane, getting screwed without a handle (7)
9 Underlying perversion in a way that goes on and on (10)
10 No different from Cyclops being imprisoned by state (5)
11 I'm horrified at that joke about American backing / support for religious arse (5,4)
12 Escape artist Howard, obviously unpopular, doesn't impress numerous international heads (7)
21 Old leader from old city with pecker getting erection (5)
23 A South African Joe Soap's first short book raised nothing (5)
25 Lance stuck inside you? Go to one side and point, blushing (8)
27 Farted: awful, awful row, interrupting epilogue (9)
28 Putting a rocket up one in the act of dining? (9)
30 "Blair's 1997 victory was ASLEF's undoing" – Primarolo (5,4)
31 Stone, Sharon's tip: "spin – the precursor of many a 'new' fad" (4,1,4)
33 Mandy lacks interior regard? Bollocks! (2,3)
34 F— stupid git, innit? Not an outsider, though (7,2)
36 Characteristic morality of those screwing around (5)
38 Novel, excellent exam success era: Tony's half popular, with help coming up (1,7,2,5)
40 He dispensed with his Prozac in a personality disorder (13)
42 Notes the cash taken by a company's liquidator? (7,5)
44 Firstly, Fallujah is sick of bombs (5)
47 Archer setting his sights on cracking America, with Bill out of it? (5)
48 A bit insane, loopy, as in "not there" (2,8)
50 Unreasonable, taking a girl sexually almost on the vertical? (1,3,5)
51 Stinking flighty types? (3,3,3)
52 Experiencing the sort of outing "bent" public officials enjoy (9)
54 Flier's fuel half bust (4,3)
56 Talk: "Saddam's Last Request for Chemical Warfare Protection" (3,4)
58 Not without purpose, having what it takes to go after Bush's guts (6)
60 Subject to sanctimonious crap, patter off (5)
63 Off the top of my head, it's some fiscal policy (5)

£500 prize to first solution opened on 31.12.04. Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN. Or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk

Solution to Crossword No. 276

Winner: IAN PATTERSON

ACROSS: 1 Idle talk 6 Bottle 9 Midair 10 Excreted 11 Gambling Bill 13 Abased 15 Xenophon 16/24 Knickers in a twist 19 Hearse 21 Delicatessen 25 Toyboy 26 Urchin 27 Dandruff.

DOWN: 2 Doing a bunk 3 Erasmus 4 Aural 5 Kleenex 6 Back bench 7 The clap 8 Lies 12 Tossing off 14 Dietician 17 Cheetah 18 Shafted 20 Assayer 22 Elton 23 Oner.

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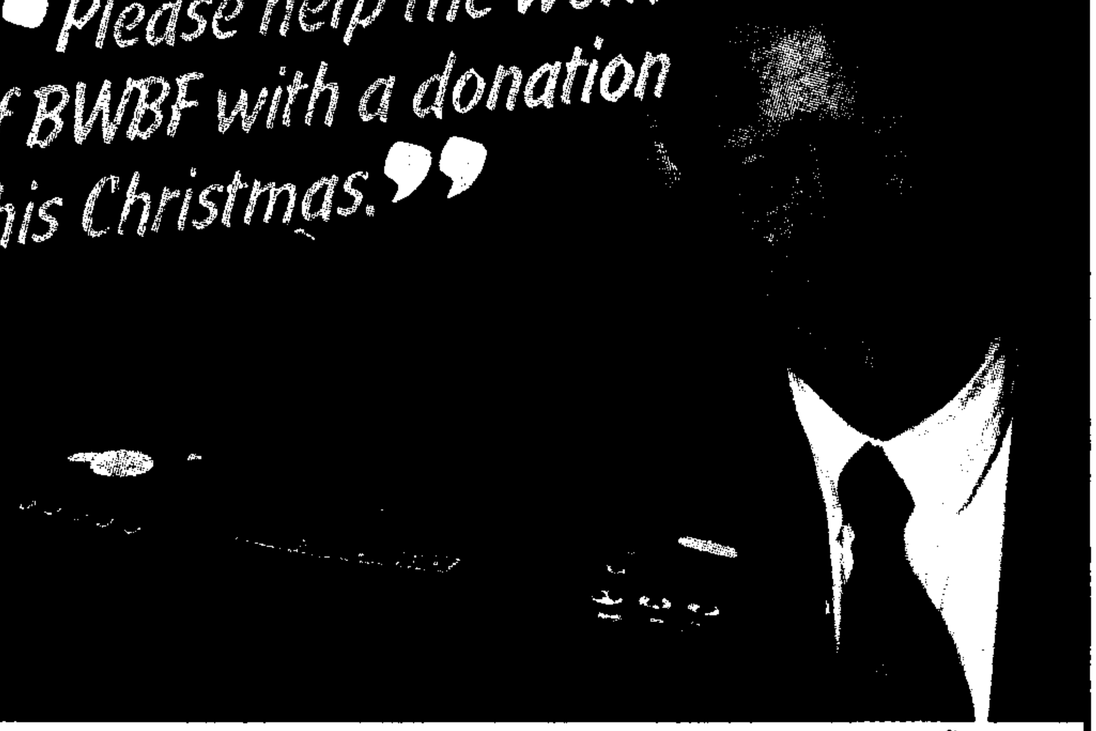
Not the usual appeal from Nick Ross

"Please help the work of BWBF with a donation this Christmas."



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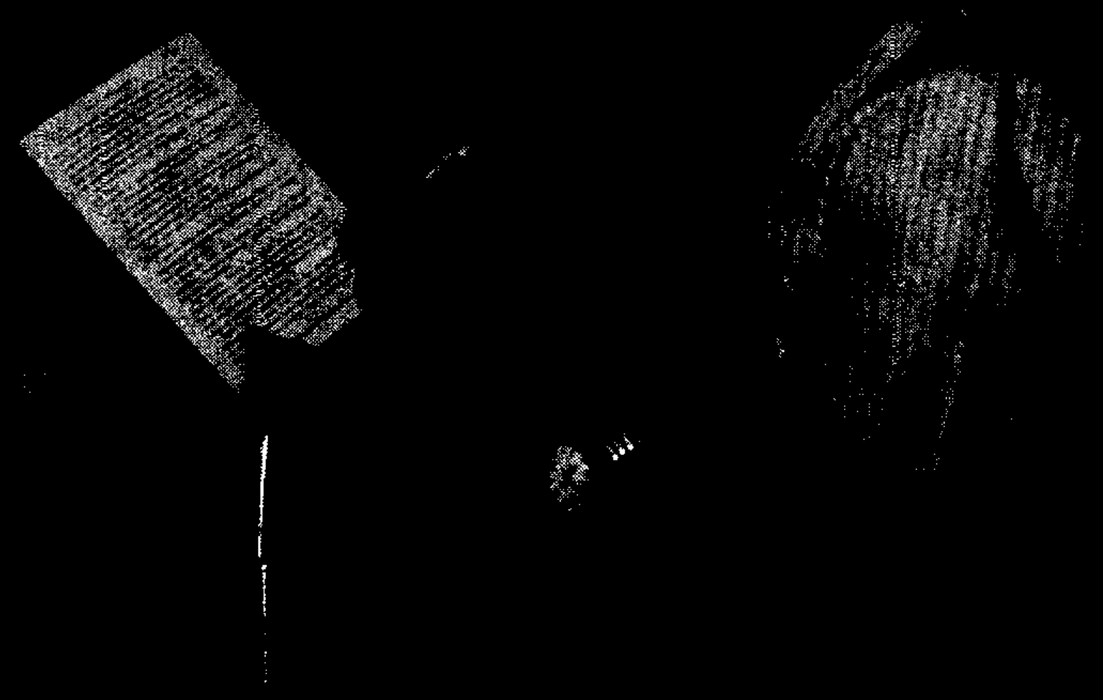

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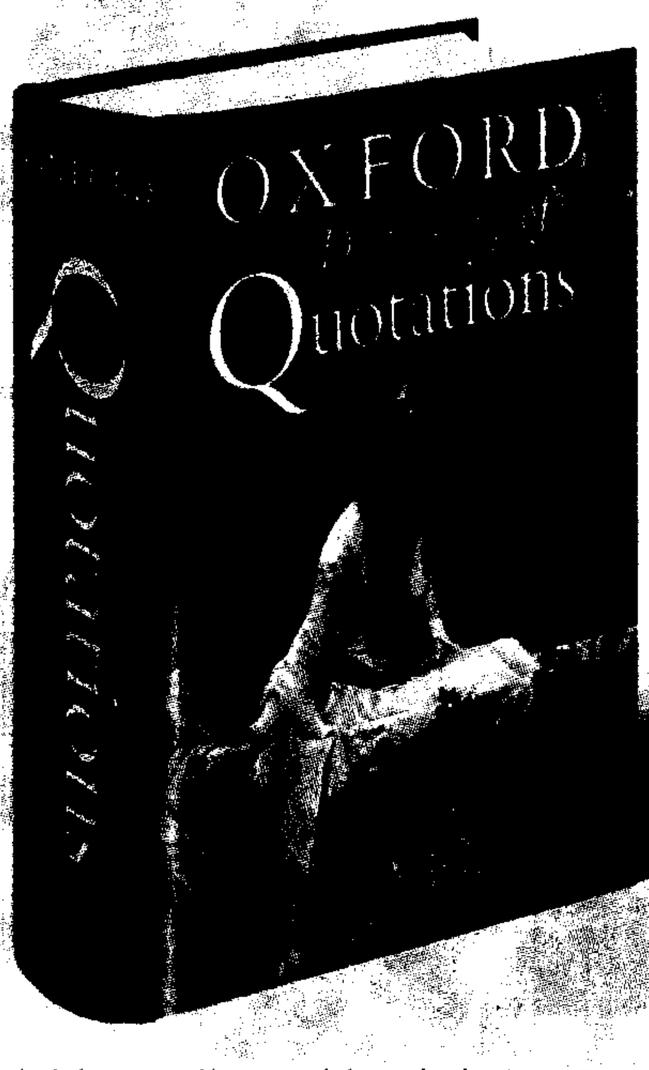

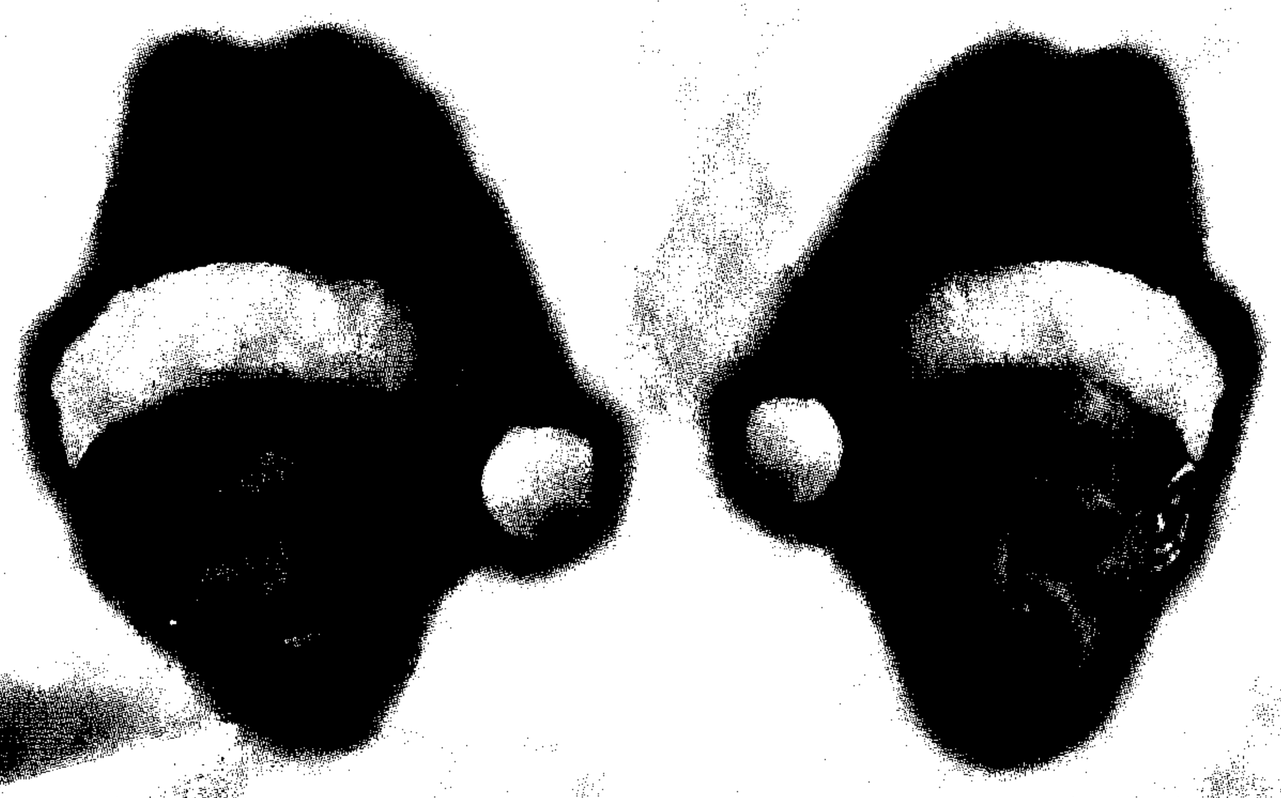

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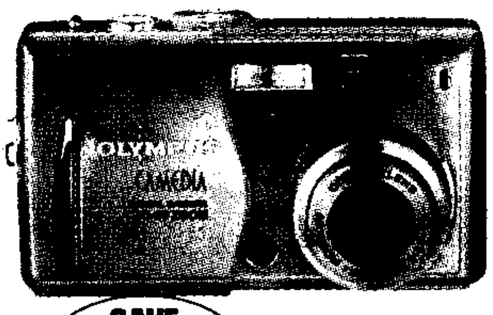

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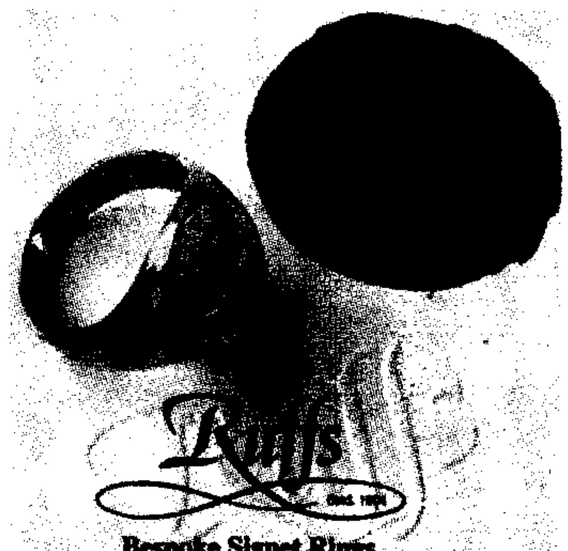

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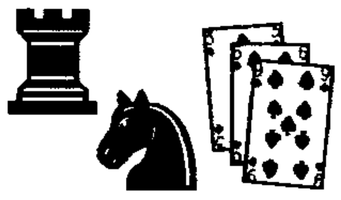

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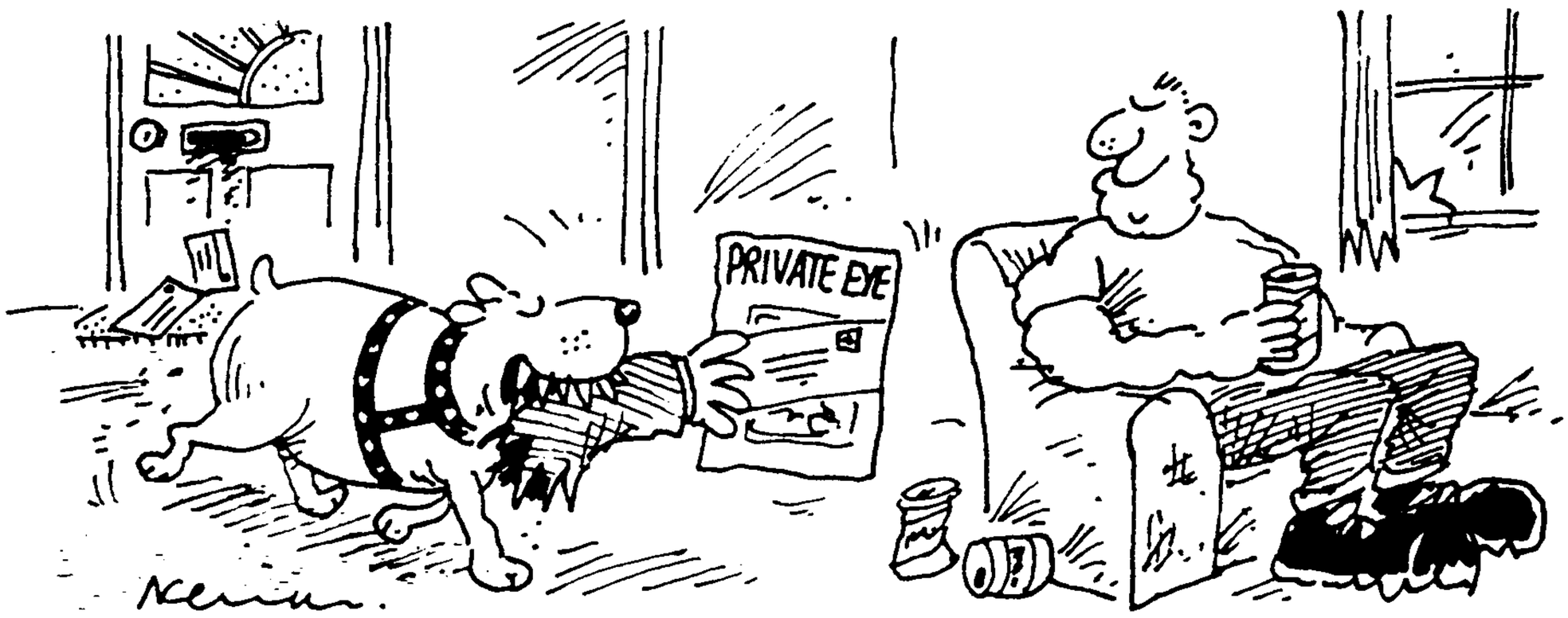

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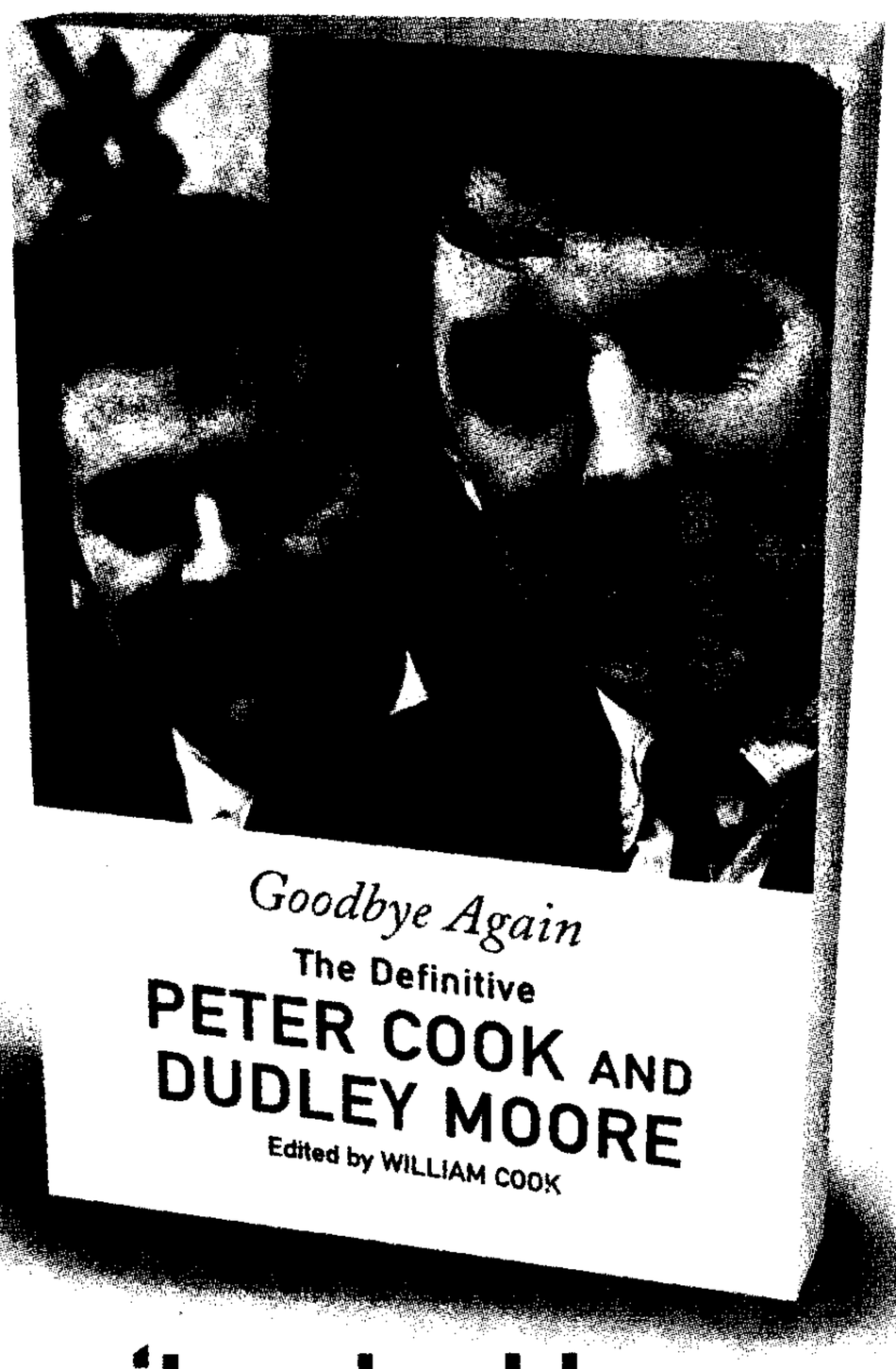

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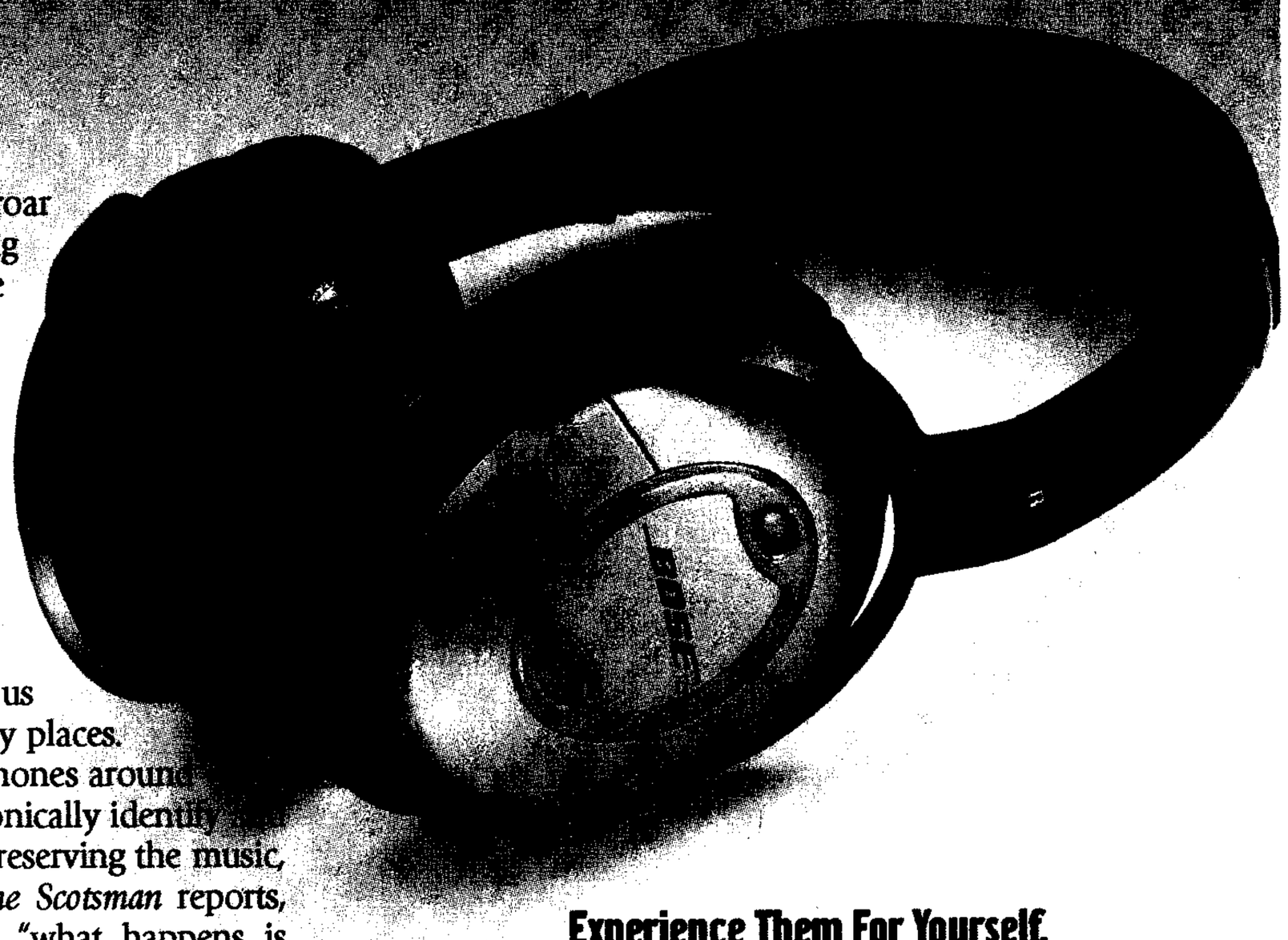

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